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# **WIDOWS AND WIDOWHOOD IN EARLY MODERN VENICE**

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of the requirements of the  
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## Abstract

Widows in early modern Venice accounted for a significant percentage of the female population yet they have never been studied specifically. They participated in Venetian society, through legal and financial activities, socially and culturally. They had a central role to play in the lives of many Venetian families, and were substantially involved in household management and raising children. They could be influential, both personally and through the use of testamentary conditions and they are a subject worthy of much greater attention than has been accorded them in the past. This thesis examines a number of aspects of widows' lives and considers the cultural constructs surrounding the widow.

One important part of this study is an investigation into the variety of situations which widows encountered. This prompts discussion about the ambiguity of widowhood as a female state and as an indicator of identity. Evidence from a number of sources brings into question what it meant to be a widow, both practically and stereotypically. The identification of stereotypes and challenging of assumptions offers a new perspective to the history of widowhood.

Another crucial aspect of this research on the Venetian widow is the identification of a wide range of sources for such a study. While a number of these are used within the thesis, providing information about the widow's legal situation, family connections and financial position for example, it is also the purpose of this research to identify and examine sources suitable for future study and to consider their uses and difficulties.

This thesis concludes that widowhood was a state which placed women in an ambiguous position, financially, legally and socially. Widowhood affected a large number of Venetian women and influenced their lives in a great variety of ways. This thesis has begun the examination of widowhood in Venice, and such research must continue. The path is now open for study into every aspect of the life of the Venetian widow, and the importance of these women to Venetian family and society.

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## **Introduction – Chapter 1**

The death of a spouse is consistently seen as a major source of stress requiring more readjustment than any other event in life.<sup>1</sup>

This quote from C. J. Barrett's modern investigation into 'The Stresses of Widowhood' explains why the study of widows and widowhood is essential to any social history. Widowhood is something that can happen to any woman with a partner, at any time during her adult life and at any point within the relationship. Beyond the tragedy of the loss of a loved one, this loss engenders the need for total reassessment. Not only is the widow required to adapt herself emotionally to life alone but also she must come to grips with the financial, legal and social changes that death inevitably leaves in its wake. Widows are part of a minority group that suffer "because they are perceived to be carriers and transmitters of the reality of death" and they have to reposition themselves within their social group in accordance with the attitudes of others towards this loss.<sup>2</sup> This situation is one that is as applicable to the early modern period as it is apparent today.

The study of widowhood is the study of a social group that has no fixed boundaries and is constantly in a state of change. While the need for readjustment is a constant in all but a few exceptional cases, beyond that there are an infinite number of experiences which a widow can have on the loss of her husband. They vary for reasons of time, geographical location, social position, wealth, religion, family and age. Widows are united solely by the fact that they have, at some time in their history, lost a husband and yet they are frequently referred to as a coherent group.<sup>3</sup> It is an aim of this research to consider the variety of widowhood experiences.

Definitions of the word 'widow' can raise problems. If death of a spouse is the only prerequisite then what do we call the widow who remarries? Buitelaar has raised this issue without going far towards solving it, accepting that death of a spouse is, cross-culturally, the most important classification.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this research 'widow' will refer to all women who have lost a husband, and those were remarried will be noted as such.

The widow of the early modern period had her own set of cultural constructs into which to fit. She was alone in a society that placed great emphasis on the marital state. She was neither a valued virgin nor a protected wife, sexually aroused and yet outside the control of a man. In the

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<sup>1</sup> C. J. Barrett, 'Women in Widowhood', p. 857

<sup>2</sup> C. J. Barrett, 'Women in Widowhood', p. 856

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this thesis 'widow' will refer to someone who has lost a husband to whom they were legally married, as this is the inference of the term in documentary material of the time, unless otherwise stated.



eyes of the church, she had been given a second chance at sacred celibacy but to much of society she was a risk. The widow was in an anomalous position and this makes her particularly interesting as a focus of study. The documentation of the period frequently notes the marital state of women and, without husbands to take over all the legal and financial dealings, widows are the women most frequently found in many sources. They provided tax records, bought and sold property, made wills and generally made an impression in a world where the married woman's mark was more likely to be left under the name of her husband.

Zemon Davis has considered the very earliest forms of women's history and shows that widows have always had a role to play.<sup>5</sup> The biblical story of Ruth is perhaps the most famous early work on widows, but they fitted into the traditions of 'memorials to women worthies' and biographical studies too. Widows were also noted in early works of history because they were saintly or exceptional in some other way, but in general pre-war histories they were usually referred to only in passing. The post-war interest in women's history was slow to encourage specific work on widowhood, and it is only in the last twenty or so years that the lives of widows have been considered in detail. This may seem strange as widows have always made up a considerable percentage of the female population, however, Blom suggests that the reason it took so long for feminist historians in particular to take up the subject of widowhood is because very few of them were married, let alone widowed and thus they felt no immediate identification with the subjects.<sup>6</sup>

Widows are in fact visible in many areas of historical study, particularly within the fields of demographic and family history. They are also considered in studies on female ageing and marriage. They are often grouped with orphans and spinsters, orphans because of the connection with death, and spinsters because of their apparent celibacy. The connection is also made because all three states were associated with poverty. Such stereotypes have been accepted without much debate until recently, yet widows could be rich, young, powerful and sexually active, or poor, old, oppressed and celibate in any combination.

Much of the work from the 1970s<sup>7</sup> which notes widows actually does so in relation to demographic subjects such as remarriage, family size and household structure. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber's work on Florence in the fifteenth century has been particularly important for showing what a demographic force widows really were within early modern Italian society.<sup>7</sup> A

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<sup>4</sup> M. Biutelaar, 'Widow's Worlds', pp. 1-7.

<sup>5</sup> N. Z. Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition', p. 83ff

<sup>6</sup> I. Blom, 'The History of Widowhood', p. 192.

<sup>7</sup> D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*, pp. 213-218.



reasonably large age gap between husband and wife was not uncommon in the marital tradition of the period and this meant that, if women survived childbirth, they were likely to outlive their husbands.<sup>8</sup> Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber's demographic survey using the 1427 *Catasto* shows that widows could constitute up to 15 % of the female population (depending on whether the figures were taken from town or country) and King notes that, in northern Italy, 10% of forty year old women were widows, rising to 50% in the over 60s.<sup>9</sup> The importance of demography to the study of widowhood will be considered more carefully later. What these figures illustrate here, however, is that widows of this period were a demographic force of some considerable size.

More recently Chojnacka's demographic work has shown that there were over 4,000 widows in early modern Venice.<sup>10</sup> They were a significant minority, but one which has not yet been studied in any detail. Hunecke has studied marriage rates but ignored the significance of remarriage within them.<sup>11</sup> Bellavitis has examined the dowry reclamation system thoroughly, but there is still room for an evaluation of how it functioned for the Venetian widow.<sup>12</sup> Chojnacki talks about widows in several contexts, and his work has been an invaluable starting place for this research, but never devotes his entire attention to their position.<sup>13</sup> Cowan has considered the plight of individual widows, in his research into the *Prove di Nobiltà* of the *Avogaria di Comun* and has considered their position within the nobility to some extent, but he has not embarked on a study of widowhood specifically.<sup>14</sup> It is Monica Chojnacka's work which most recently has considered the Venetian widow.<sup>15</sup> Her work, considering widows' numerical importance, as well as their residential position, has been invaluable to this thesis; however widows were only part of her concern. There is the need for an examination of widows within the context of the Venetian family and within the context of the study of Venetian women more generally.

This thesis aims to fill this gap in the histories of the Venetian family and of Venetian women by researching the position of the Venetian widow. As well as describing the laws

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<sup>8</sup> Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*, pp. 205-211, suggest that in Florence the average age gap between husband and wife was around twelve years in the early fifteenth century and that the average for Tuscany as a whole was more like seven years.

Chojnacki suggests for Venice of the same period that patrician brides were often 13-16 years old but that late teenage brides were increasingly common. The average age for men on marriage increased too, from late twenties to early thirties. This suggests that an age gap of more than ten years was not uncommon.

S. Chojnacki, 'Measuring Adulthood', pp. 374-379.

<sup>9</sup> M. L. King, *Women of the Renaissance*, p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*, Table 5.8, p. 235.

<sup>11</sup> V. Hunecke, 'Matrimonio e Demographia'.

<sup>12</sup> A. Bellavitis, 'The Famiglia "Cittadina"'.

<sup>13</sup> S. Chojnacki, 'Patrician Women', 'Dowries and Kinsmen', 'Kinship Ties', and 'The Power of Love'.

<sup>14</sup> A. Cowan, 'Love, Honour' and *The Urban Patriciate*.

<sup>15</sup> M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*



affecting the widow, it will consider how well these were put into practice. It will look at the financial situation for widows and discuss the importance of dowry return for the financial stability and independence of the wealthier widow. It will consider the extent of female property holding and the way in which property was dealt with and disposed of through testaments, although the documentary sources available mean that few of those considered are from the very poorest levels of society. Further, this thesis will study the likelihood of remarriage, given demographic trends and popular opinion and the effect of prescriptive writing on the behaviour of the widow.<sup>16</sup> The thesis also aims to show how the Venetian widow fitted into the family, into the society in which she lived, and into the ideological constructs which outlined the life of the ideal woman of the period. The themes of the history of widowhood naturally interlock, for example, the financial state of a widow was very much connected to the legal situation of the place in question. This thesis aims to give a coherent picture of Venetian widowhood.

Methodologies and sources used in the past can help with the evaluation of the primary sources, and this chapter will outline the theoretical approaches to the study of widowhood to give a background to the rest of the thesis. Feminist history was slow to catch onto the subject of widowhood, and this is illustrated admirably by the fact that *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, edited by M. Humm as recently as 1989, contains no entry for widow or widowhood. What the dictionary does do, however, is set out clearly the purpose of feminist history,

The aim of feminist research is to create theories grounded in the actual experiences and language of women by investigating women's lives and experience in their own terms.<sup>17</sup>

Widowhood, as an experience in the lives of many women, is therefore an ideal topic for feminist research. While this thesis is not entirely grounded on feminist theories, it does acknowledge the importance of feminist history for bringing the study of women, and consequently widowhood, to the fore. There are two ways in which feminist study approaches history, one looking at the way in which women have been exploited throughout history and condemning the patriarchy for its suppression of opportunities for women. The second way is showing the loopholes in male domination, exceptions to the rule of subordination. The history of widowhood has been considered from both points of view and yet seems, in a way, to span the gap, by pointing out the

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<sup>16</sup> While the problems of the use of the phrase 'popular opinion' are recognised, it is used here because it is wide enough to represent the variety of contemporary literature which has been studied.

<sup>17</sup> M. Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, p. 192, entry for 'Research'.



suppression imposed on widows who, nevertheless, by the nature of their position, had opportunities beyond those traditionally available to women.

The first approach is often used when widows from the poorer and working classes of society are being considered and is particularly notable in earlier works on widowhood. Klapisch-Zuber's study on "The Cruel Mother" sets out all that was restricting and damaging in the life of the widow in Florence, considering the way they were manipulated by, and yet not belonging to, the natal and conjugal families. The 'good mother' could rarely also be the 'good daughter' and thus the widow was in a no-win situation.<sup>18</sup> Chabot considers more closely the practical position of the Florentine widow, examining means of support and showing that return of the dowry was by no means a certainty and that lack of family support almost inevitably meant a worsening in status and finance for women on widowhood.<sup>19</sup> Studies of widowhood which are associated with ageing often put the widow in a particularly bad position, as ageing is rightly associated with impoverishment. Hufton's comparison of widows with spinsters is also pessimistic about the work opportunities for the widow.<sup>20</sup> None of these articles is vehemently feminist in its outlook, but they lack the optimism found in works taking the second approach.

Studies addressing the life of the widow from the viewpoint of opportunities rather than suppression tend to have one of several characteristics. Either they are considering how much greater were the opportunities for widows in comparison to other women, looking at evidence beyond that found in traditional sources to show that the position and status of widows was greater than had been previously believed; or they consider the life of an individual widow and use the opportunities taken by that individual as an example of what widows could achieve. Roelker's introduction to papers from the 1981 Berkshire conference: 'Widowhood and Rational Domesticity: Modes of Independence for Women in Early Modern Europe' indicates the beginning of this trend, noting that in recent years;

Historians have discovered and investigated the "liberating" effect of widowhood in many historical contexts.<sup>21</sup>

Holderness has taken the viewpoint that widowhood contained more opportunities than wifelyhood. He has made a study of the financial potential of widows in pre-industrial society and concluded that they did have an important economic function.<sup>22</sup> Hempenius-van-Dijk has shown

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<sup>18</sup> C. Klapisch-Zuber, "The Cruel Mother", p. 131.

<sup>19</sup> I. Chabot, 'Widowhood and Poverty', pp. 297-8 & 305.

<sup>20</sup> O. Hufton, 'Women Without Men', pp. 355-376.

<sup>21</sup> N. Roelker, 'Introduction', p. 376.

<sup>22</sup> B. A. Holderness, 'Widows in Pre-Industrial Society', pp. 423-442.



the advantageous legal position widows held in the Dutch Republic and Miskimin has looked at late Medieval France and shown how widows could play a role in the running of the legal system by actively participating in the courtroom.<sup>23</sup> Vassberg, in the second vein, has used census information to illuminate the respected position widows held within sixteenth-century Castilian society and Todd, considering the issue of remarriage in London, has suggested that the chances for female agency within the marriage market were far greater than had previously been conceived.<sup>24</sup> Looking at individual widows, Morten Crabb has studied the power exercised by Alessandra Strozzi, and suggested that it was not particularly out of the ordinary and Kalas has shown the considerably influential position held by noble-widow Jeanne de Gontault.<sup>25</sup>

What these studies offer is a view on how sources can be used to give a different picture to the assumed one, and they also raise ideas about the study of widowhood which encourages comparison. Some historians have tried to take a more balanced view, although the second approach is perhaps more evident in the most recent studies. King and Hufton have both looked at the two sides to the story of widowhood, and Calvi's study, while emphasising that life was difficult for widows of the early modern period, shows the ability of one widow to survive independently and gain respect.<sup>26</sup> Hardwick shows how the motives for an action can completely change its significance for feminist history.<sup>27</sup> For example the relinquishment of property management to sons once they came of age was not just a loss of independence and power. It can also be regarded as a way for the widow to retain independence more easily by giving up some of her more antagonistic status.

Two important points have been made with regard to the writing of widows' history generally. The first is the need to place emphasis on widows' powers relative to those of other women.<sup>28</sup> The second is the importance of recognising the ambiguity of the widow's position, that widows were not a cohesive social group, and that distinction needs to be made between rich widows and poor widows, young and old and so forth. This fact distorts any attempt to map the approaches to the study of widowhood as those writing on poor widows may feel that a negative

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<sup>23</sup> D. Hempenius-van-Dijk, 'Widows and the Law', pp. 89-102.

H. Miskimin, 'Widows not so Merry', pp. 207-219.

<sup>24</sup> D. E. Vassberg, 'The Status of Widows', pp. 180-196.

B. J. Todd, 'The Remarrying Widow', pp. 54-92.

<sup>25</sup> A. Morten Crabb, 'How Typical was Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi', pp. 47-68.

J. Kalas, 'The Noblewidow's Place', pp. 319-339.

<sup>26</sup> M. L. King, *Women of the Renaissance*

O. Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her*

<sup>27</sup> J. Hardwick, 'Widowhood and Patriarchy', pp. 139-140.

<sup>28</sup> This is a point raised in several articles but noted particularly clearly in P. R. Baernstein, 'In Widow's Habit', p. 803.



viewpoint is entirely justified for their case while accepting that not all widows were suppressed, poor or without power over their own lives. Biutelaar importantly points out that the factor joining widows does not relate to their financial status or household position but the fact that they all depend on their husbands, or lack of them, to give them social identity.<sup>29</sup>

Having considered the approaches taken by others to the history of widowhood, the approach taken in this thesis will now be considered. This introduction has examined ways of studying widowhood and Chapter 2 considers the sources available to the historian of Venetian widowhood. A more thematic examination of the topic begins with Chapter 3's discussion of widows and the law.

It is clear from the research done by others that an understanding of how widows were affected by statute, custom, tradition and legal practice is essential to any discussion of widows and widowhood. Although widows were never on an equal footing with men in any legal system in early modern Europe, they did have rights beyond those of the minor or married women and thus are interesting from a legal history perspective, particularly to those studying laws relating to property, inheritance, marriage settlements and guardianship. Even under Medieval Canon law, widows were separated from other women, because they were considered, alongside the poor and orphans, to be in need of protection.<sup>30</sup>

When comparisons with legal situations elsewhere are being carried out, care is needed because there is no way of knowing how statutes have been interpreted by others, and even whether they were ever used at all. Kuehn has considered the situation for Florence and looks at the way in which custom and ancient law played a part alongside statute in inheritance rights for women.<sup>31</sup> He discusses the problems of interpretation when statute is used as historical evidence and suggests the use of example cases to make explanation more clear. Kirshner has gone some way towards this, using case studies alongside statute to show how the law actually functioned.<sup>32</sup> A knowledge of the variety of traditions Europe-wide is useful for comparison. For example, in England the Magna Carta set out widow's property-owning rights and widows could hold freehold land and tenancies by 'widow right'. They were entitled to one third of the husband's estate and half if there were no children. In France the position was complicated by local traditions but

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<sup>29</sup> M. Buitelaar, 'Widows' Worlds', p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Brundage has looked at the position of poor widows within medieval canon law and considered why they were singled out as being in need of protection.

J. A. Brundage, 'Widows as Disadvantaged Persons', pp. 193-197.

<sup>31</sup> T. Keuhn, 'Some Ambiguities', pp. 11-28.

<sup>32</sup> J. Kirshner, 'Wives' Claims'.



Hardwick notes that the widow did actually have a legal ‘personality’.<sup>33</sup> On widowhood she got her own property back and half of any shared property. She could be guardian of her children, head a household and deal with property, yet she was often still under the influence of male relatives. What these examples indicate is that widows could have a liberated position, at least within the sphere of female agency.

The legal position of the Venetian widow will be established in Chapter 3 and compared closely with that of other Italian widows. As well as describing the laws affecting the widow, and the practice of those laws, this chapter will place the widow in the context of the Venetian legal system. It will consider how the law, in a wider sense than just statute, affected the lives of widows in a variety of conditions.

Inheritance and dowry reclamation were perhaps the most influential factors on the financial situation of the widow in this period and also closely relate to the legal situation. In Venice the dowry was the main source of inherited wealth for the widow and its reclamation was an issue that affected all parties associated with her. Her natal family may well have felt that the widow should return the dowry to the family patrimony or use it again in a useful remarriage; the marital family would have hoped that the widow chose to remain within their household and include the dowry in the patrimony of any surviving children. The widow may have been happy with either of these situations, but by failing to reclaim her dowry she was forfeiting her legal entitlement to an independent fortune, however small it may have been. In the past, studies have often concentrated on the amount of the entitlement and the mechanisms which existed to assist the widow in reclamation. Additionally, it is important to investigate the actual success widows had and to consider motivations for reclamation. Klapisch-Zuber’s article, ‘“The Cruel Mother”’, considers the importance of the dowry to the widow as well as to the two families it occupied and looks at the emotional as well as legal perspectives of dowry reclamation, encouraging thought about the damage a widow risked to her children by removal of the dowry from their patrimony.<sup>34</sup> Some of her conclusions need to be re-evaluated in the light of Venetian evidence, however.

Following on from dowry reclamation and legal entitlement is the issue of inheritance more generally. The financial situation of a widow could depend greatly on the generosity of her husband. What she was left, beyond her entitlement, could mean the difference between wealth

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<sup>33</sup> J. Hardwick, ‘Widowhood and Patriarchy’, p. 131ff.

<sup>34</sup> C. Klapisch-Zuber, ‘“The Cruel Mother”’, most of the discussion on the dowry issue and its implication for the widow is found on pages 121-131.



and homeless poverty.<sup>35</sup> The most suitable source for the study of this is wills, both of the husbands and of the widows themselves. For a few the legal entitlement of dowry was sufficient but others needed a generous legacy or a job in order to survive. Bequests from husbands to wives were relatively common and, whether or not they indicate affection, trust or conformity to a customary norm, they played an influential part in the financial situation of many widows.

Some widows were not entitled to large amounts of property, and lacked wealthy and generous husbands, so the question of how single women supported themselves must be raised. Statistical surveys from England and France into the numbers of widows within particular industries have helped identify areas where they were prominent, and guild records often indicate how far widows were able to continue their husband's businesses. Holderness has looked at the most prominent economic functions for widows in pre-industrial England and discovered that many women were able to continue working.<sup>36</sup> Hufton, looking at the eighteenth century, however, paints a rather gloomier picture, suggesting that, outside domestic service, the most a working widow could expect to earn was a pittance.<sup>37</sup> The position for the working widow is, in fact, most frequently held to be a very difficult one and, in times of economic crisis, widows were among those who suffered first, but they did run businesses successfully and headed households.<sup>38</sup>

Linked to the problems faced by the working widow is the issue of widowhood poverty. From biblical times it has been accepted that widowhood can be a time of reduced circumstances for women and it is well recognised that widowhood poverty often increased as the widow got older. Chabot has considered the way the dowry system in Florence led even wealthier widows to experience periods of poverty, but it is important not to forget the potential economic advantages of widowhood as well.<sup>39</sup> Hardwick's work on seventeenth-century France is a particularly balanced example, showing that, even if the widow was economically disadvantaged, it was not necessarily an entirely unfortunate situation.<sup>40</sup> Chapter 4 considers how the financial markets

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<sup>35</sup> In legal systems where the widow was entitled to the use of the marital home, no matter how many children remained, then poverty was at least not often followed by homelessness, but for widows in Italy, often forced to leave their homes if there were no minor children, then the search for somewhere to live could become a traumatic issue.

<sup>36</sup> B. A. Holderness, 'Widows in Pre-Industrial Society', pp. 437-440.

<sup>37</sup> O. Hufton, 'Women Without Men', pp. 361-362.

<sup>38</sup> One example of widows in successful business comes from Alistair Mann's paper to the 1997 conference of the Research Group in European Culture at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle, entitled 'Gender and the Business of Books: the Role of Women in Scotland's Early Modern Book Trade', which notes that a high proportion of widows were able to successfully continue in this trade.

<sup>39</sup> I. Chabot, 'Widowhood and Poverty', pp. 296-300.

<sup>40</sup> J. Hardwick, 'Widowhood and Patriarchy', pp. 133-143.



could affect the life of the widow, but also looks at the potential for the widow to have an active role in financial matters.

The theme of the widow and the family, found in Chapter 5, encompasses ideas on residence, household position, respect and affection. Demography has been essential for noting the numbers of widows within society, i.e. their numerical importance, but also has been used to show what positions widows held within society. Where a widow lived after the death of her husband is illuminating with regard to her independence and social position. Demographic study can show how many widows headed households in their own right and what kinds of households. This varied across the continent in the early modern period and depended not only on local tradition and law, but the age of children, and the will of the husband. In France widows were often only household heads until their children came of age but elsewhere, especially in the cities, which attracted migratory widows, they could account for up to 15% of household heads. Figures for sixteenth-century Castile actually note a high of 22%, but figures of 9.1% in the Tuscan countryside and 14.2% in Florence were more normal.<sup>41</sup> Venetian figures indicate that many widows headed their own households, and lived with their children, either as guardian or as dependent, within the household of adult offspring. Some widows returned to natal kin, some remained with marital kin, some lived with their children and, in some places there was a tendency for widows to live alone or in groups away from their families.

Chapter 5 considers the contact a widow retained with her natal and marital families after the death of her husband. In Venice in particular, some debate has arisen around this in relation to dowry gifts. While Chojnacki uses evidence from wills and dowry donations to suggest that connections between women in families were far closer than previously suspected, Queller and Madden cast some doubt on this, believing that the majority of female contact after marriage was within the marital line.<sup>42</sup> This debate has yet to be resolved, and has opened up the question of contact between widows and their families for further study.

Chapter 5 additionally considers networks including widows outside the family framework, particularly those created within religious institutions. This aspect of widowhood has thus far most frequently been approached from within the convent. Primhak has considered, for the period 1400-1550, the ways in which widows could participate in religious communities. They could not take full vows without papal dispensation but could enter convents as *converse* or

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<sup>41</sup> D. E. Vassberg, 'The Status of Widows', p. 183.

D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*, p. 305.

<sup>42</sup> S. Chojnacki, 'Dowries and Kinsmen', p. 589.

D. Queller and T. F. Madden, 'Father of the Bride', pp. 700-703.



they could join third orders.<sup>43</sup> It seems that, once integrated, widows often became involved in the financial running of institutions, having a greater knowledge of household economics than many nuns. Primhak has also identified widows residing in convents who had no intention of taking vows. This thesis will look at religious groups and institutions such as the *Ospedale*, and consider how they contributed to widows' support and status.

Demography has also been used for the study of remarriage, the theme of Chapter 6. As a quantifiable entity, remarriage is interesting to the historian as a means of identifying change. With statistics it is possible to show how many could remarry, given the number of 'available' men and women in society, and, with some degree of accuracy, how many did remarry. But figures alone cannot explain why widows did remarry. It seems that, Europe-wide, between 10% and 30% of widows remarried and these figures vary for a number of identifiable reasons.<sup>44</sup> Griggs has pointed out some of the most commonly noted factors, suggesting:

that remarriage should favour youth over age and men over women is a literary convention and social commonplace.<sup>45</sup>

Other important determinants were geographical location, occupation and the number and age of a woman's children. Factors such as prescriptive writing, wills and financial evidence also need to be taken into account to offer a more complete picture of remarriage. It has often been regarded as the most common 'resolution' to widowhood but in fact less than half of the women widowed in this period remarried, where the percentage for widowers was much higher. There were advantages in remarriage, for the artisan or farmer's wife in need of labour for example, but it was not entirely advantageous. Wealthy widows were the most in demand as marriage partners yet they were the least likely to remarry, indicating that those who had the ability to remain financially independent often did so.

The poorest members of society are often of interest to those studying remarriage. Boulton and Todd's debate on remarriage in seventeenth-century England centres on the question of whether a widow would remarry by choice or whether economic reasons and opportunity were

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<sup>43</sup> V. Primhak, *Women in Religious Communities*, pp. 116-121.

<sup>44</sup> F. Benigno notes a remarriage rate of 15% of widows in early modern Sicily. F. Benigno, 'The Southern Italian Family', p. 173.

A. Bideau gives figures of between 21% and 23% for Thoissey-en-Dombes in the late seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries.

A. Bideau, 'A Demographic and Social Analysis', p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> S. Griggs, 'Towards a Theory of Remarriage', p. 188.



more significant deciding factors.<sup>46</sup> Remarriage is an area where the ambiguous position of the widow is really evident. The Catholic Church rated chastity more highly than marriage and encouraged widows not to remarry. Many writers and humanists of the time agreed.<sup>47</sup> Yet there was also the danger of the lone woman, and one who had 'known' a man.

Remarriage was just one area where society judged the widow. The legal and financial constraints placed upon the widow offer an indication of how she was viewed, but the use of demography, legal history and financial perspectives alone leave the historian with a two-dimensional image. Over the last decade historians have begun to also pay attention to the cultural constructs surrounding the widow. Studies have been made of the advice that contemporaries gave to widows and the stereotypes which surrounded them. Dulac has successfully analysed the methods used by some medieval and early modern writers to give advice to widows and, by looking at the writings of Christine de Pizan, she has also managed to offer something of a woman's perspective.<sup>48</sup> Arden has considered instead the image of the widow in literature, showing how writers thought the widow should behave rather than how she did.<sup>49</sup>

Carlton's work on English widows is perhaps the most interesting for comparison. He analyses the stereotypes of widows portrayed by the theatre and literature, relating to issues such as remarriage, and he shows with statistics how these contrasted with the reality.<sup>50</sup> Because widows were outside traditional gender roles they were a threat, but once made a figure of fun, some of that threat was removed. Studies of the dress of widows have also shown something about the way they were viewed and the way they wished to appear.<sup>51</sup> While it is rewarding to describe these cultural constructs, it is more important to consider why the stereotypes were created and perpetuated against all the evidence. The type and meaning of these stereotypes will be considered in greater detail in Chapter 7. The point here is that prescriptive writing and literature can offer valuable evidence for the historian studying widowhood if the emphasis of

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<sup>46</sup> J. Boulton, 'London Widowhood Revisited', pp. 323 and 341.

B. J. Todd, 'Demographic Determinism', p. 422.

<sup>47</sup> Humanist Francesco Barbaro and Giulio Cesare Cabei both saw refusal to remarry as a sign of fidelity in the true wife, and Cabei noted that it was the widow's duty to preserve this second virginity to give to God. F. Barbaro (trans. B. G. Kohl), 'On Wifely Duties', p. 201.

G. C. Cabei, *Ornamenti*, p. 17.

<sup>48</sup> L. Dulac, 'Mystical Inspiration', pp. 241-246.

<sup>49</sup> H. M. Arden, 'Grief, Widowhood and Women's' Sexuality', pp. 305-306.

<sup>50</sup> C. Carlton, 'The Widow's Tale', pp. 122-124.

<sup>51</sup> L. Taylor's book on mourning dress has suggested ideas about the attitudes of the public towards mourning dress and the changes in it over the centuries.

L. Taylor, *Mourning Dress*.



analysis is placed not necessarily on what it actually says, but on what it indicates about the society in which it was produced and that society's attitudes towards widowhood.

One alternative way of studying widowhood and society that is increasingly popular is micro-historical study. There have been a number of studies of this type and they are both interesting to read, and informative. Davis's study of the Donà family has used the life and development of one family to elaborate on the general situation within Venetian society. More recently studies have been made of various Florentine widows. The first of these from 1986 by Brucker looks at the wider issue of the marriage market in Renaissance Florence while concentrating on the specific case of one remarrying widow, Lusanna. Her case was by no means typical but, nevertheless, raises a number of important issues about identity and reputation.<sup>52</sup> Morten Crabb sets out specifically to see how far her example, Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, was typical of Florentine widows.<sup>53</sup> Her use of letters enables him to get a more detailed view than is available about most widows, and she is able to construct a 'model' widow from wills and tax records to make comparisons. Another study based in Florence is that by Calvi on Maddalena Nerli.<sup>54</sup> The remarkable narrative of her life has raised many questions, particularly about how age at widowhood affected the experiences a woman had.

While micro-historical study is very exciting and interesting for bringing to life some aspects of widowhood, it is not without its problems, especially for Venice. The first problem is that the use of this type of study is limited by the subjects open to it. Most of the women who left enough records to deserve intimate study were of the wealthiest and ruling classes and thus were far from 'typical'.<sup>55</sup> A second problem is that, while the life of one particular widow may be remarkably interesting, without other sources for comparison, one example alone cannot tell much about other widows in society. The main problem for this type of study in Venice is that Venetians did not keep family records in the way that Florentines did.<sup>56</sup> There have been a number of studies on educated women, heretical women and prostitutes, women who differed from the 'norm' but not yet one on widows. While this thesis does not undertake extensive microhistorical study, it is a way the subject could be approached in the future.

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<sup>52</sup> G. A. Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna*.

<sup>53</sup> A. Morten Crabb, 'How Typical was Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi', pp. 47-68.

<sup>54</sup> G. Calvi, 'Maddalena Nerli and Cosimo Tornabuoni', pp. 312-337.

<sup>55</sup> Two good examples of studies of powerful widows are those on Catherine de' Medici and Jeanne de Gontault, both of which concentrate on the power available to widows in the right situation.

S. Ffolliott, 'Catherine de Medici as Artemisia'.

R. J. Kalas, 'The Noblewidow's Place'.

<sup>56</sup> See J. S. Grubb, 'Memory and Identity', on why Venetians did not keep such detailed family memoirs as their Florentine counterparts.



Some of the themes addressed above discuss practical issues, while others, such as the question of cultural constructs, work on a more abstract level. One theme which unites both practical and abstract is that of widowhood identity. Considered in Chapter 8, this theme raises the question of how far a widow was recognised solely by her marital identity. The concluding chapter brings together themes found throughout the rest of the thesis, challenging assumptions made about Venetian widows in the past, and suggesting ways in which they could be studied in the future. It also considers the significance of this thesis to the study of social history in Venice more generally, as it is important to recognise that widows were part of a Venetian society which had its own set of complex structures.

With the Venetian population divided into three classes, the *Patriciate*, the *Cittadini* and the *Popolani*, the variety of possibilities for widowhood related not just to personal position but to social status. Upper-class women faced greater restrictions on their public lives but often had more financial sway. Artisan wives were more likely to be involved in family business opportunities during marriage but less likely to be able to continue financial activity on any scale after widowhood. Both groups participated more widely in Venetian society than those who have considered their position to be purely domestic realise, but as yet the real extent of their economic activity has not been fully investigated.

The wider family group was particularly important to the Venetian patriciate, where marriage could be an alliance of families as well as of individuals. With only patrician males able to participate in political activity, it was, in fact, not just women who were outside the ranks of the politically active, but actually was most of the population. This does not mean that the *Cittadini*, *Popolani* and women were entirely without influence in society though. As household heads, guardians, executors and property dealers, women, and particularly widows, are crucial to the wider history of the Venetian family. Women from all classes are more evident within the source material than has previously been realised by those using purely political records, and women in Venetian history are finally getting the recognition and attention their activity and visibility warrants.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> For general surveys of Venetian Society see:  
D. Chambers and B. Pullan, *Venice*.  
A. F. Cowan, *The Urban Patriciate*.  
J. C. Davis, *A Venetian Family and its Fortune*.  
O. Logan, *Culture and Society*.  
B. Pullan, *Rich and Poor*.  
D. Romano, *Patricians and Popolani*.



This thesis covers the century 1550-1650. It was felt that a hundred years was a suitable period for study because it allowed for consideration of change over time. Any larger time scale would have meant that a less detailed survey was possible. The century saw economic, religious and social change, with the transfer of economic attention away from long-haul sea trade, but it was a period with little legal change which affected widows. The period was also selected because it offered a wide range of suitable and relatively complete sources on which to base a study. The thesis concentrates on residents of Venice and does not include those inhabiting the islands of the lagoon or the Venetian mainland territories, yet the time scale allows the study to be one of breadth. Rather than illuminating one small aspect of Venetian widowhood in a narrow time scale, this thesis aims to expose the wide scope of sources suitable for future study.

As noted earlier, few who have mentioned widows in studies of Venice have done so in any detail, and none outside the context of their own particular field of interest, be that dowries, female inheritance or the question of noble status. By concentrating on widows this study will establish their position in relation to a number of issues in Venetian history. It will consider the legal system, the financial situation and the marriage market and place the widow in these contexts. Her current invisibility means that existing studies are lacking an important dimension. Most importantly, this thesis will show the position of the widow within the Venetian family, where she had a crucial role to play, a role which has been thus far largely neglected. Within Venetian history, this research begins to fill a big gap in studies of women and the family. While it cannot do this alone, by identifying sources and possible approaches it hopes to encourage future study.

This thesis intends to look at a variety of aspects of widowhood using a broad range of sources and over a relatively large historical time scale, yet in one location, to retain a manageable scale to the research. As well as having a strategic place in the history of Venice, it aims to have a place in the history of widowhood, as a source for comparison and a challenge to some existing assumptions about widowhood through the innovative use of sources. This research does not aim to identify one archetypal Venetian widow, but to show the variety of possibilities for the woman who had lost her husband. While it is important to draw conclusions about commonly occurring situations, such as the frequency of remarriage, this thesis does not aim to establish a norm. It aims to show that, while widows could share many legal, financial and social factors, the only consistently common ground was the loss of a husband at some time during the woman's adult life.



## Sources for the Study of Venetian Widows – Chapter 2

Widows are present in almost every source available for the study of Venetian history. Because of this, and the lack of research into widows and widowhood in Venice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, part of the aim of this thesis has been to give a broad overview of the ways in which the topic could be studied. Identification and examination of the large number and variety of sources which are suitable for such study is one way of encouraging future research.<sup>1</sup> Blom has highlighted one of the main problems with the study of widowhood, as precisely that widows were “a very mixed group”, and she advocates a wide methodology.<sup>2</sup> Her advice has been taken in the formulation of the thesis. This research concentrates on sources created between 1550-1650 and having a time frame of this size has meant that, while there are opportunities for comparison, the amount of material is not overwhelming. Some of the recognised problems of using statistical, literary and visual sources within a historical PhD will be considered in this chapter. While the complaint may be made that none of the sources has been used to its full potential, it is considered more important to use a number of different sources, in order to draw some conclusions but also to demonstrate the range of material available.

This chapter is ordered by the nature of the sources, legal, financial, demographic, literary and visual, and all those noted are to be found in the Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV) unless stated otherwise.

### Legal Sources

While laws do not necessarily accurately represent the society in which they are created and in which they operate, they are a useful and easily identified starting point for any historical study. As long as the social context surrounding them and the way in which they functioned are considered alongside the actual statute, then useful conclusions can be drawn from them. A number of types of legal source have been found for the study of widowhood in Venice, including legislation, court records and notarial papers.

The *Compilazione delle Leggi* is the starting point for much study into Venetian law. A frequently used, eighteenth-century source, it is not always completely accurate but is generally

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter will not consider secondary sources, except for a small number which are commentaries on the primary literary texts, and eighteenth and nineteenth-century legal overviews. For a comprehensive discussion of the secondary material considered in this thesis, see Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> I. Blom, ‘The History of Widowhood’, pp. 191-195.



regarded as offering acceptable summaries of the original laws. As the *Compilazione delle Leggi* is indexed by subject, it is not always easy to locate statutes, especially for this study as there is no reference specifically to widowhood. Strangely, the section on guardianship makes no mention of widowhood control of children and the section on “the Wife” includes only a very small amount of material on remarriage.<sup>3</sup> Sumptuary laws, those attempting to regulate dress and behaviour, of which there were many in early modern Venice, also frequently refer to women, but rarely mention widows.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, it is in fact the section on dowries which is the richest source of information on widowhood finance and on widowhood rights.<sup>5</sup> As the dowry was supposed to be a woman’s main source of income on widowhood, a proper understanding of the widow’s legal right to its return is essential. Bellavitis has already made a useful study of the laws relating to the dowry process, showing the development of the statutes relating to it, but her study was not undertaken from the viewpoint of the widow.<sup>6</sup> Also, although she touches on the location of reclamation proceedings, she has not attempted to establish how the process actually functioned.

Two further sources which are also extremely useful for establishing the legal rights of the widow in early modern Venice are Marco Ferro’s *Dizionario del Diritto Comune e Veneto* (1847) and Giovanni Donato’s *Prattica Civile delle Corti del Palazzo Veneto* (1663).<sup>7</sup> While these two sources are not strictly primary, nor are they modern scholarly works. Their importance is as accurate tools for the use of the legal profession. They were both written to explain the practicalities of the legal situation and their use to the historian today is not just as useful reference material but also as casebooks. Ferro’s concisely condensed description of the laws surrounding widows is infinitely clearer than the jumble of pieces of legislation found in the *Compilazione delle Leggi*, and makes sense of those pieces, allowing them to be fitted together. He sets out the statutes relating to widows from the very origins of Venetian law. Donato minutely describes the workings of the legal system, clarifying the purposes of the primary sources, for example, by showing why a widow might need witnesses to testify to the amount of her dowry and thus the reason for the existence of the *Giudici del Proprio, Testimoni*. He offers page after page of alternatives, covering every eventuality in the legal process which might affect

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<sup>3</sup> ASV, *Compilazione delle Leggi*, B. 277.

ASV, *Compilazione delle Leggi*, B. 366. (Section on Tutele e Tutori)

<sup>4</sup> See M. Newett, ‘The Sumptuary Laws of Venice’, for an examination of the development of sumptuary legislation in Venice.

<sup>5</sup> ASV, *Compilazione delle Leggi*, B. 186. (Section on Dote)

<sup>6</sup> A. Bellavitis, ‘La Famiglia “Cittadina”’, pp. 55-65.

<sup>7</sup> Marco Ferro, *Dizionario*.



the widow (for example in dowry reclamation), although as the information is ordered by court, an understanding of the type of legal processes affecting widows is useful. While the accuracy of Ferro and Donato should not be taken for granted, as a tool for the examination of the Venetian legal system, they are of great use.

With the possible exception of creating *testamenti*, dowry reclamation was the most important and difficult legal undertaking a widow was likely to be involved in. Thus, it is vital to gain an understanding of how the process functioned. The *Giudici del Proprio* were the magistrates who dealt with these cases and their extensive records are illuminating and worthy of greater attention than this thesis has been able to afford them. The method of dowry reclamation was a complicated one, which could take several years, sometimes longer, and which could involve witnesses, experts to assess property and written records of the dowry. The first part of the process is found in the records of the *Vadimonio* where the widow made her request in one of five ways, firstly by presenting her *Carta di Dote*, a record of the amount of the dowry made at the time of the marriage. She could also present her marriage contract, an inventory or will made by the husband, or witnesses to testify to the amount of the dowry that the husband had received. While the majority of requests seem to be in the form of transcribed marriage contracts, there were other examples.

Once the *Vadimonio* had been presented, there were a variety of ways in which the dotal property could be returned to the widow. Payment was to be made, unless the marriage contract stated otherwise, first in *Mobili* (furniture and other movable property), then in *Stabili di Fuori* (property outside Venice), then finally, if that was not sufficient, in *Stabili della Città* (property within Venice). The *Mobili* payments were found in the eponymous Buste of the *Giudici del Proprio*, the *Stabili di Fuori* in the Buste entitled *Foris* and the *Stabili della Città* in the *Minutarum*.<sup>8</sup> Witness evidence is found in the Buste entitled *Testimoni*. Each of these parts refer back to the date of the original *Vadimoni*, making it relatively easy to trace cases backwards. For example, a statement of payment in one of the *Foris* Buste would note on exactly which date the request for repayment was entered in the *Vadimoni*. The same is true for the *Mobili*, *Minutarum* and *Testimoni* Buste. However, it is more difficult to trace a particular case from *Vadimoni* to conclusion because the *Vadimoni* Buste do not note where information on requests can be found in the *Mobili*, *Foris* and *Minutarum* Buste.

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Gio Donato, *Prattica Civile*.

<sup>8</sup> Buste (henceforth B.) are the files into which much of the archival material is organised in the ASV.



To examine the workings of the dowry reclamation process in this thesis, one hundred *Vadimoni* requests for the 1630s have been noted, and an attempt has been made to find all the later related parts.<sup>9</sup> While this has been successful in many cases, some came to no satisfactory conclusion. The main problem with working from *Vadimoni* to conclusion is that it could take decades for the cases to appear in the *Mobili*, *Foris* and *Minutarum*. As there is no immediate connection between the date of the *Vadimoni* and the later parts, it is only by systematically going through all the Buste of *Mobili* etc. for the period after the *Vadimoni*, that the whole case can be tracked down. It was not unusual for cases to go through in a few days but it was equally likely to take months or more. Were an investigation into the *Giudici del Proprio* to be done in the future it would be better carried out over a larger period of time or backwards, i.e. from *Foris*, *Minutarum* or *Mobili* to *Vadimoni*. In addition to the lack of correlation between *Vadimoni* and the other parts, there was also often no correlation between the date when the *Mobili* was granted and that of the *Foris* or *Minutarum*. Another problem with the *Giudici del Proprio* is that there can be a large number of sections within one or a number of Buste relating to one single case so it is difficult to know if everything relating to that case has been found.

The numbers of widows who applied each year for their dowries to be returned show that, in spite of suggestions by prescriptive writers that the good widow should not try to remove her dowry from the patrimony, many widows embarked on the reclamation process because it was a common and perfectly acceptable practice in which they had faith. Unfortunately, disruption at the ASV in 1997-8 caused by new EU health and safety regulation rendered this source temporarily inaccessible, impeding a full analysis. While a general survey of all the parts of the *Giudici del Proprio* was undertaken, it was not possible to make any effective quantitative evaluations about the likelihood of full reclamation and normal time-scale of the process.

The *Giudici del Proprio* records are not the only court records which have evidence of widows participating in the legal system. Chojnacka has used Inquisition records to examine the position of women and Ferraro has used the *Causarum Matrimonialium*, found in the Archivio della Curia Patriarcale, Venice (ACPV), in the case of battered wives.<sup>10</sup> Cowan has examined the *Prove di Nobilità*, looking at widows who married into the patriciate and their social origins.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ASV, Giudici del Proprio, Vadimoni, B. 149 and 156 Mobili, B. 172, 173, 174, 184, 185, 186 and 187, Foris, B. 40, 41 and 42, Minutarum, B. 21 and 22, Testimoni, B. 72 and 73. All the *Vadimoni* cases are taken from the 1630s and the *Mobili*, *Foris* and *Minutarum* also cover the 1630s and the beginning of the 1640s.

<sup>10</sup> M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*, pp. 64-77.

J. M. Ferraro, 'The Power to Decide', pp. 492-510.

<sup>11</sup> A. Cowan, 'Love, Honour and the Avogaria di Comun', p. 5-19.



The *Raspe* records of the *Avogaria di Comun*, as used so comprehensively by Ruggiero, also have a wealth of information to offer, not only on the standing of widows in the court but also about their sexual and social activities.<sup>12</sup> Widows are scattered throughout the records and while Ruggiero mentions them occasionally, the opportunity for the study of widows offered by the *Raspe* has yet to be fully exploited.

In addition to the *Giudici del Proprio*, I have chosen, rather than using sources already under investigation by other historians, to use another source thus far relatively unexamined for the study of widowhood, the *Examinum Matrimoniorum* found in the Archivio Patriarcale di Venezia. In the 1560s the Council of Trent ordered a tightening of marriage regulation and this seems to have been the reason behind this set of records.<sup>13</sup> The function of the *Examinum Matrimoniorum* was for widows and widowers to prove that their spouse was really dead, through the examination of witnesses, allowing them to marry again if they wished. Each case notes details about husband and wife, and presents the evidence of two or more witnesses, and sometimes a testimony from the widow herself. The need for such enquiries seems normally to have arisen from the fact that the husband died outside Venice and thus there was no legitimate record of his death. Occasionally the husband died inside Venice but there were not the records to back up the wife's claims. This is a particularly interesting source as it offers insight into what was considered to be a legitimate marriage, in the public view, and also into the fact that it was not unusual for couples to be living apart during their married life, for a variety of reasons. Although its cases can by no means be said to be representative of the norm, it contains information on the occupations of husbands, on the family, on the practical living arrangements of widows, and the importance of reputation to female status. For this thesis particular interest has been taken in the fact that often witnesses remarked that a couple were 'held to be married' or that a woman lived 'as a widow', suggesting that widowhood had something to do with lifestyle, as well as actual marital status.

In the *Examinum Matrimoniorum*, as elsewhere, widows could be involved as victims or defendants, or as witnesses, for either defence or prosecution. Almost all legal sources therefore

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<sup>12</sup> G. Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros*.

<sup>13</sup> No secondary sources give the origin for this investigative court, and the archivists of the ACPV were able to suggest only that it might be as a result of legislation from the Council of Trent. The first records found date from 1592, but the sample used for this thesis was taken from the 1630s, where records were more extensive. 31 cases were found and these included the testimonies of 64 witnesses. ACPV, *Examinum Matrimoniorum*, B. 27 (1<sup>st</sup> January 1632 – 5<sup>th</sup> May 1632), 32 (10<sup>th</sup> February 1633 – 30<sup>th</sup> May 1633) and 37 (26<sup>th</sup> December 1637 – 26<sup>th</sup> December 1638).



have something to say about widowhood and maintain a legitimate and important place in its study.

### Sources providing financial information

Information about widows' financial situations is extensive within the Venetian archives. It has already been noted that the *Giudici del Proprio* provides a substantial amount of information about dowry reclamation, including evidence about the amounts requested for reclamation, and the amount and physical nature of the property actually repaid. Similarly, wills are an essential source, giving information about financial aspects of the widow's life, including the types and amount of property widows were able to bequeath to family, servants and others. In contrast to Florence, where all women required a legal guardian, Venetian women were allowed to make wills independently, and frequent childbirth meant that they often made a number of wills. Donations to charities, orders and confraternities offer insight into devotional life and bequests to relatives show how far women retained contact with their natal families after marriage and with their marital families on widowhood and even into new marriages. Studies of wills have been carried out in the past for Venice, for example by Chojnacki who considers evidence about marital relationships.<sup>14</sup> Wills have been particularly useful to this thesis because they are clearly indexed by marital name and they note marital status, making widows easy to identify.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the wills of widows, husbands' wills are also a crucial source of information about widowhood. Due to problems of identification, it is hazardous to attempt to match the wills of husbands whose wives later made wills as widows. Therefore, information from husband's wills used in this thesis has been extracted on a more random basis.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> S. Chojnacki, 'The Power of Love', pp. 126-148.

<sup>15</sup> The wills used throughout this thesis are from the ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti: Atti Barbaro, B. 86, p. 4t. Atti Beazian Fabrizio, B. 152, no. 38. Atti Beni, B. 160, no. 130. Atti Bianco, B. 124, nos. 33, 80 and 165, B. 125, no. 332. B. 127, nos. 702 and 732. Atti Brinis, B. 158, nos. 843, 918 and 920. Atti Brinis (pub. Alessandro Angelo) B. 1139, no. 219. Atti Canal A, B. 210, nos. 509 and 531. Atti Cigrigni, B. 208, no. 158. Atti Crivelli, B. 219, nos. 242 and 268. B. 220, nos. 332, 382, 383, 445, 496, 521 and 613. B. 222, nos. 944, 969, 1134, 1140 and 1195. B. 223, nos. 1227, 1273, 1317, 1326 and 1406. B. 224, no. 1706. Atti Erizzo, B. 1178, nos. 286 and 306. Atti Marsilio, B. 1206, no. 97. Atti Moro, B. 1202, no. 39. Atti Perazzo, B. 1222, nos. 180, 196, 229, 236, 238, 244, 245 and 287. Atti Secco, B. 1191, no. 275. Atti Ziliol Giulio, B. 1242, nos. 137 and 156.

<sup>16</sup> The husbands' wills used throughout this thesis were taken from ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, B.32, no. 443. B. 79, no. 452. B. 127, nos. 772 & 849. B. 158, no. 759. B. 189, nos. 6 & 79. B. 193, no. 34. B. 1191, no. 295. B. 1194, nos. 397 & 425. B. 1202, no. 30. B. 1209, no. 539. B. 1213, no. 932 and B. 1278, no. 377.



Tax records are another useful source of information about widows, as Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber's study of the 1427 *Catasto* in Florence has shown.<sup>17</sup> In Venice for the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries there is only one suitable tax source, the *Decima* for 1582, although it is not as complete as the *Catasto*.<sup>18</sup> With the assistance of an index created in the early 1990s, it is particularly easy to access those *Decima* records which relate to widows and these offer a lot of information on widows' financial status, although of course only of those whose wealth reached a level where they were required to pay tax. They often describe the extent of property held by widows and also sometimes provide detail about where the widow lived and more expansive family information, such as how many children lived with her. Even within the tax paying band it is interesting to see the range of widows' wealth.

There are a number of problems with the *Decima* as a source, not least that clear records were only available of one year's returns and thus there is no opportunity for comparison, but it is useful for providing information about residence, control of property and the financial capacity of widows of the time. Examples within it show that many widows were well aware of their financial situation and even how much tax had been paid in the past. The other main problem is that which faces any student of tax records, simply that the accuracy of information set out in such sources must be regarded with some suspicion, because falsification of tax records was usually of benefit to the taxpayer. It would be useful in the future if a comparison could be made between the declarations of widows and those of men, to allow some assessment of the differences in the amount of property held.

General notarial archives can add information to that gained from tax records and wills, showing widows buying, selling, leasing and renting properties, as well as making more complex legal and financial arrangements. Those records relating to widows found in family archives are often of a similar nature, and are in fact frequently copies of documents which can also be found in the notarial archives. Grubb has noted the lack of private literary material, in the form of diaries, and *ricordanze*, within the family archives of the Venetians and a brief examination of a number of sources has revealed little information about widowhood activity as recorded exclusively by the family.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps of more use to the future study of Venetian widows than the time-consuming study of family archives would be an extensive survey of notarial acts, exposing

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<sup>17</sup> D. Herlihy & C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*.

<sup>18</sup> ASV, Dieci Savi Sopra le Decime in Rialto B. 168 and 169 were used for sampling in this thesis. 40 records were extracted and read from within these Buste.

<sup>19</sup> J. Grubb, 'Memory and Identity', pp. 375-387.

ASV, Archivio Privato, Archivio Mocenigo S. Stae. B. 48.

ASV, Archivio Privato, Archivio Tiepolo, B. 1.



the extent and nature of widowhood legal and financial activity, although given the nature of notarial records, which are often un-indexed, this process could require very extensive research to provide sufficient information.

Marriage contracts can be extremely informative about who controlled the finances in early modern Venetian families. A study of the signatories of the contracts, the representatives of the bride and groom and the contributors to the dowry divulges a great deal of information. The involvement of widows in the creation of marriage contracts indicates their ability to take financial responsibility in a legally acceptable way and shows how they took responsibility for their families too. Marriage contracts also give more specific information about dowries and the property exchange taking place during a marriage. Use of them facilitates comparison between the average dowry of a first time bride and that of a widow, and allows conclusions to be drawn about widowhood property-holding. Their importance as a source for demographic study will be noted below. As a financial source they show who held the purse strings and indicate the financial commitment of widows to second or third marriages.

As well as looking at widows involved in controlling their own property, some attempt has been made in this thesis to look at widows who required financial assistance, in the form of charity. Widows were considered to be part of the deserving poor and the fact that they appear as the recipients of charity in a number of different places shows that widowhood poverty was taken seriously. Franca Semi's book, *Gli "Ospizi" di Venezia* shows that a number of institutions made widows their priority.<sup>20</sup> Investigation into the institutions noted within her survey has shown that not only were many set up to care for widows in the early modern period, but also that some retain that same function to the present day. The records of each of these charitable institutions alone could provide enough information for a whole thesis, and research into them would greatly assist not only the study of widowhood in Venice, but also the study of charity. That widows were clearly worthy of extensive charitable activity is an important indicator of their status both financially and socially. What we cannot yet know is how far the charity available went to relieving widowhood poverty in Venice.

Charity records are among several sources of information on widowhood which it has not been possible to use to their full extent within this thesis, and there are a number of reasons behind the omissions made. Guild records, which potentially offer a great deal of information about where widows were working and in which industries they were operating, are one such source and, while Luca Molà has done some work on widows in the silk industry, evidence of

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<sup>20</sup> Franca Semi, *Gli "Ospizi"*.



working widows in other industries has barely been touched upon.<sup>21</sup> The problems with using this kind of record, and the reason they have not been used in this thesis, is that it is not obvious where information about widows can be found, and they come to light only when the records are being comprehensively studied for other purposes. The *Scuole* also require investigation, particularly because Chambers and Pullan offer some documentary evidence of widows requesting charity from the *Scuole Grande*, but again, to have begun to use these sources and not done them justice would have led to inconclusive results for this thesis and an inadequate survey of the material available.<sup>22</sup> What this thesis has been able to do, particularly with regard to widowhood finance, is investigate activities through notarial records and wills, while highlighting awareness of other sources available for future study.

### Demographic Sources

While there are a good number of demographic sources available for Venice, a surprisingly small percentage of them are actually of any use to a study of widowhood. The censuses used by Beltrami and Beloch, for example, where they do mention women, do not note their marital status.<sup>23</sup> The most useful demographic source found for a study of widows is the *Status Animarum*, in the ACPV, which dates from the late sixteenth century and lists the household members of a large number of Venice's parishes. Although not entirely complete, as it recorded only Christian households, and as there are a number of parishes absent, this is the best survey of population in Venice for use in a study of women. This valuable source has been organised into a database by Monica Chojnacka, who has kindly allowed me to use some of the information contained in it.<sup>24</sup>

The main focus of demographic work in this thesis has not been based on mortality or household, but on remarriage. The most significant quantitative work on marriage and demography carried out for Venice has been by Hunecke, but he has not looked specifically at remarriage.<sup>25</sup> Useful starting points for studies of remarriage, and the one used in this study, are the indices of the *Avogaria di Comun*, compiled in the nineteenth century by G. Giomo.<sup>26</sup> These list marriages in order by woman's name, and note the names of father and husband, as well as a

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<sup>21</sup> L. Molà, *The Silk Industry*.

<sup>22</sup> D. Chambers and B. Pullan (eds.), *Venice*, pp. 297-320.

<sup>23</sup> D. Beltrami, *Storia della Popolazione*.

G. Beloch, 'La Popolazione di Venezia', pp. 5-49.

<sup>24</sup> M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*.

<sup>25</sup> V. Hunecke, 'Matrimonio e Demographia', pp. 269-319.

See also A. F. Cowan, 'Patricians and Partners'.



primary reference for each marriage. However, they offer no information about Giomo's criteria for the entry of the marriage into the index and, when comparison is made between the indices and the primary sources, it is clear that there are a number of inaccuracies in Giomo's referencing. A study of primary sources cannot be substituted by use of the indices alone; nevertheless they provide invaluable information about the range of sources which list marriages and often about individual cases themselves.

The *Avogaria di Comun, Matrimoni Registri 1-7* are the most easily accessed primary sources detailing marriage and remarriage information.<sup>27</sup> These marriage registers are arranged chronologically by register, but alphabetically by husband's surname within each register, i.e. each register covers a set period but references are divided by name within that period. In addition to these registers, a further set listing basically the same information but by date, in year-by-year registers is available.<sup>28</sup> A large number of marriages are also to be found within the *Avogaria di Comun, Contratti di Nozze*. For the 1550s this is frequently the only reference to a marriage which can be found.<sup>29</sup> For later periods marriage contracts are often found in addition to records in the marriage registers.<sup>30</sup> Marriage contract registers are ordered chronologically, although it is useful to remember that the date the contract was made and the date it was registered do not necessarily correspond with each other.

As well as being a useful source of financial and demographic material, marriage contracts also, on occasion, offer information not found in the registers: for example, sometimes a widow is noted as such in her marriage contract but not in the marriage register. This discrepancy may also appear in other sources, but the fact that many widows had marriages registered in both official registers and contract registers allows inconsistencies to be traced. This raises a mountain of questions about what would prompt a widow, or a notary, to fail to note a woman's marital status.

A third source of information about marriages is found in the archives of the Dukes of Candia. *Duca di Candia Sposali 1559-1593*, *Duca di Candia Nascite e Matrimoni 1590-1660*, and *Duca di Candia Nascite 1519-1591* all contain a small number of references to marriages.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> ASV, Avogaria di Comun (AdC), Indice 86 ter 1 & 2.

<sup>27</sup> ASV, AdC, Matrimoni Registri 88 I - 94/VII.

<sup>28</sup> ASV, AdC, Matrimoni Registri 97 I - 99 III.

<sup>29</sup> ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, Registri 149'10- 152'13.

<sup>30</sup> ASV, AdC, 113 3 and 114 4 cover the 1590s, and 117 7 and 118 8 cover the 1630s.

<sup>31</sup> This archive kept separate records of patricians resident on the Island of Crete until 1660.

ASV, AdC, B, 4646, 4647, 4649. For those marriages noted as being in Rettimi XIV, XV & XVI, see B, 4651.



The *Cronica Matrimonia* is another crucial source for the calculation of the remarriage rate, and one which causes several problems.<sup>32</sup> It is a source containing only two books listing noble, and occasionally non-noble marriages. It also lists a number, although it cannot be all, of the marriages of nobles from the Veneto. Most frequently at least one of the partners is Venetian, and if the other is non-Venetian, non-noble, widowed, illegitimate or has a specific government position, this is often stated.

Comparisons between the records in the *Cronica Matrimonia* and the other marriage registers and contracts show that there are a significant number of marriages noted within it but not noted anywhere else. Giomo used the *Cronica Matrimonia* and referenced it for a considerable number of marriages, but without knowing his criteria it is impossible to know why he used the *Cronica Matrimonia* and yet ruled out so many marriages from it for inclusion within his indices. The first book of the *Cronica Matrimonia* lists marriages up to 1560 and the second contains some entries into the early seventeenth century. Both books contain a large number of references in common but there are some which appear to be exclusive to each one. The entries were originally intended to be ordered alphabetically by surname, with the references in chronological order for each name, and this is achieved to a greater extent in Book 2. In Book 1, however, the shortage of space means that chronologically later references to popular names in the first half of the alphabet are found towards the end of the book, while chronologically later references to names found in the second half of the alphabet are actually located in the early pages.

Secret marriages were registered in the ACPV and are part of the *Archivio Segreto*, but there are only a very small number within the time period covered by this thesis.<sup>33</sup> The earliest one found is for 1633, and there are two for the 1630s and fourteen for the 1640s, but samples taken from later decades can help suggest how frequently secret marriages were remarriages.<sup>34</sup> Each case noted includes a request for the granting of a licence for a secret marriage and a copy of the licence. Records, from the 1670s onwards, also frequently state the reason why it was necessary for the marriage to be concluded secretly, fear of scandal being one of the main reasons offered. There are obviously problems with the use of the source for this thesis; however it is important for raising questions about why some widows felt it necessary to make marriages secretly.

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<sup>32</sup> ASV, AdC, Registri 106'1 & 107 2

<sup>33</sup> ACPV, Archivio Segreto, Matrimoni Segreti 1633-1678, Curia B.1, parts I and II, 1633-78 and 1678-88.

<sup>34</sup> Hunecke makes a mistake about the starting date of the Matrimoni Segreti, dating the earliest one to 1646, but in fact there are two noted before 1640. V. Hunecke, 'Matrimonio e Demographia', p. 304.



## Literary and Visual Sources

In addition to the traditional statistical and qualitative sources, a number of literary and visual sources have been used in this thesis, particularly in Chapter 7, and their importance to the study of Venetian widowhood has become increasingly clear. The first, and most obvious type of literature to use in the study of widowhood is prescriptive literature, written by contemporaries about how women, and sometimes specifically the widow herself, should live. Perhaps the best-known work for Venice on this theme is Francesco Barbaro's 1415 *De Re Uxoribus*, written as a wedding gift for a friend, and instructing the woman on life as wife and widow.<sup>35</sup> Leon Battista Alberti offered similar advice to the Florentine family.<sup>36</sup> As the family was of great importance to the Venetians, it is not surprising to find so many relevant and useful sources for study, and even those with their main focus on wives or other aspects of family life often make mention of widowhood, for example Stefano Guazzo's *La Civile Conversazione*.<sup>37</sup>

One work which makes an invaluable contribution to the study of prescriptive advice to widows in early modern Venice is Giulio Cesare Cabeo's *Ornamenti della Gentildonna Vedova* published in Venice in 1574, a copy of which may be consulted in the Marciana Library. This work, dedicated to the Illustrissima Signora Ginevra Salviati de' Baglioni, who is illustrated throughout as the most perfect widow, concentrates all its advice towards the widow. While it is not wise to draw too many conclusions about the realities of a widow's life from this type of work, it is fascinating to be given a more complete, relevant and contemporary picture of the "ideal" widow. Cabeo's work has been used quite extensively in this thesis, because of its particular relevance.

The two most important considerations when using such works are the intended audience of the work and the origins of the author. If the author was writing more specifically for a female audience then the prescription offered would be more likely to be in the form of advice than order. If it was a woman writing then the advice was more likely to be based on experience than moral belief.<sup>38</sup> Using prescriptive sources does carry some risk, as it is possible to extract from them only what the author saw as the ideal, possibly not a view that was shared by all men, let

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<sup>35</sup> B. G. Kohl, 'Introduction to Francesco Barbaro's "On Wifely Duties"',

<sup>36</sup> L. B. Alberti (trans. Renee Neu Watkins), *I Libri*.

See also M. I. King, 'Caldiera and the Barbaros', pp 19-50.

<sup>37</sup> S. Guazzo, *La Civile Conversazione*.

<sup>38</sup> L. Dulac (trans. Thelma Fenster), 'Mystical Inspiration and Political Knowledge', pp. 223-258.



alone women. However, these works offer insight into how the widow was viewed by some of her contemporaries.

Literary rather than prescriptive sources also have a part to play in the identification of the image of the widow. The plays of Pietro Aretino and Carlo Goldoni further the literary stereotype as noted by Carlton in early modern England, but add a Venetian viewpoint.<sup>39</sup> Goldoni uses a widow as the central character in his play, *The Artful Widow*, and Aretino's *Dialogues* often refer to widows and widowhood within the course of their discussions.<sup>40</sup> Moderata Fonte's *The Worth of Women* is particularly vivid in its characterisation of widows, and is of great use to the student of Venetian female constructs.<sup>41</sup> Her dialogue between seven Venetian women in a walled garden, offers alternative viewpoints on marriage and family in sixteenth-century Venice.<sup>42</sup> Moderata Fonte was exceptional and cannot be regarded as a woman truly representative, even of her own class, but, despite questions about her motives, the accuracy with which she portrayed the women in the tale, and the merit of the discussion held in the work itself is seen from its popularity at the time. That it struck such a chord with contemporaries suggests that it had some merit as an account of the thoughts of wealthy Venetian women of the period.

Costume literature displays an even more explicit visual image of how the widow should and did dress and behave, and several works of this kind were published in Venice in the early modern period. Although they were not looking at only Venetian clothing, all mention the costume of the Venetian widow. The two which have captured special interest for this thesis are that by Pietro Bertelli from 1589, and Cesare Vecellio's *Degli Habiti Antichi et Moderni*, with three editions, 1590, 1598 and 1664.<sup>43</sup> The prints found in these works are invaluable, not only because they put a visual image to all the names and individuals encountered elsewhere in the research, but also because they show something about the way Venetian women were to be viewed by those outside Venice who read these works. Pisetzky's history of Italian costume helps in the interpretation of these images, using records of funerals to describe the mourning tradition in early modern Italy, and Taylor shows how changes in the costume for mourning could affect public attitudes towards widows.<sup>44</sup> Mourning dress and rituals as described in such

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<sup>39</sup> C. Carlton, 'The Widow's Tale', pp. 118-129.

<sup>40</sup> P. Aretino, *Dialogues*.

C. Goldoni, 'The Artful Widow'.

<sup>41</sup> M. Fonte (trans. Virginia Cox), *The Worth of Women*.

<sup>42</sup> V. Cox, 'The Single Self', pp. 523-527.

<sup>43</sup> P. Bertelli, *Diversarum Nationum*, Padua 1589. This is found on microfilm in the Manuscript room of the Marciana Library.

C. Vecellio, *Degli Habiti*, Venice 1590, 1598 and 1664. This is found in the Correr Library.

<sup>44</sup> R. Levi Pisetzky, *Storia della Costume*, pp. 261-264 and 455.



costume books and in prescriptive literature show what was expected of a widow after the death of her husband.

A final visual source, paintings of widows, has been largely untapped, particularly until Catherine King's recent work on women patrons.<sup>45</sup> The buildings of the Istituzione di Ricovero e di Educazione (I.R.E.) at the Zitelle on the Giudecca house a number of interesting portraits of widows, wealthy patrons to the institution, although mostly from the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The chapel of the I.R.E.-controlled *Ospedale della Crociferia* also contains a number of large canvases including portraits of the inmates of the institution, believed to be widows. Other images of widows, or references to them, have been discovered by King but there is still much room for research on the patronage and portrayal of widows in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Venice.

### **Statistical Data**

Three decades separated by forty year gaps were chosen as sample periods for the statistical surveys contained in this thesis. This was in order to divide the period evenly. The 1590s was a period of economic growth and recovery, the 1550s and 1630s were periods downturn or stagnation. The 1590s was a period of demographic development and the 1630s, in contrast, was a time of plague. These sample decades were used for the gathering of information on remarriage and for the sampling of widows' wills.

The differing characteristics of these decades might have been expected to affect the data in certain ways, but in general they did not seem to greatly affect the amount bequeathed in wills, or the composition of marriage contracts for example. The only significant effect related to the plague years. It was expected that the number of remarriages would decline in line with the total number of marriages by the 1630s; however the number of remarriages in fact remained relatively constant. This was perhaps due to the fact that female remarriage was not greatly affected by the restrictions reducing the number of first marriages, and also the fact that plague time produced more widows and thus correspondingly more second marriages.<sup>46</sup>

While the sources used for this thesis have already been listed in the footnotes to this chapter, it is useful here to explain exactly how the samples were taken. The same samples of wills, tax declarations, court records and marriage records are used throughout this thesis. Changes in the sample size relate to the quality of each particular source and its suitability for

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1. Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, p. 86-93.

<sup>45</sup> C. E. King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*.



evaluation in specific circumstances. Where there are discrepancies in the sample size from a particular source the reason for that discrepancy is noted alongside the sample, either in the text or in the footnote.

The sample of 100 cases from the *Giudici del Proprio* is taken from the 1630s. Despite the potential for variations in the numbers reclaiming between decades, it was felt that the quality of records for this periods would be equal to any other decade and thus a sample would be representative. The 100 cases from the *Vadimoni* section of the records were not chosen according to any particular criteria. They were entered into a database and the corresponding sections from the *Mobili*, *Foris* and *Minutarum* were also entered to assist effective evaluation.

The sample cases from the *Examinum Matrimoniorum* were also taken from the 1630s. Until that point its records, which only began in the 1590s, were more fragmented. From the records held for the 1630s three books were chosen and the sample selected from within those at random.

Widows' wills were sampled in a more complex way. From the extensive indices of wills held in the ASV three databases were created noting all the widows' wills for the three sample decades.<sup>47</sup> From these, notaries whose records contained clusters of widows' wills were selected. Although this method does raise questions about how representative the sample was; the variety of conditions of widows found within the records of single notaries suggests that both poor and rich widows would use the services of the same notary. This method produced a sample of 51 wills, one of which was incomplete and thus is not suitable for use in all the analysis undertaken by this thesis.

The initial intention of this research when sampling the wills of husbands was to match husbands' wills with those women who were later widowed. 15 were found to have matching names, but on closer examination it became clear that few were actually the husbands looked for. As these wills had already been transcribed and were effectively a random sample, it was felt suitable to use them for this research. As such an important source, in future it would be very useful to take a larger sample of husbands' wills. One of the main difficulties in doing this would be that men's marital status is not mentioned in the indices. A random sample of men's wills would probably produce a number of men who were not husbands at all.

The *Decima* tax source was only available for one year of the period 1550-1650, 1582. Using the recently created indices a database was made including every widow who submitted a

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<sup>46</sup> See Chapter 6 for information on the frequency of remarriage.



declaration in 1582. Of the 755 widows found, a sample of 40 was chosen for closer examination. As the *Decima* Buste are not arranged according to name or wealth it was considered reasonable to take this sample from two Buste, 168 and 169. This sample displayed a wide range of levels of wealth among widows, suggesting that it is representative of widows as a group of taxpayers.

The sampling of marriage sources was done on a less random basis, although still using the decades noted above. Within those ten-year periods every marriage was noted in a database in order to establish a clear idea of the number of remarriages to first marriages. The marriage register entries and marriage contracts for every widow who married in the period were checked and any discrepancies noted and accounted for.<sup>48</sup>

While the sampling itself was relatively straight forward, there were problems in the compilation of some figures, particularly when trying to work out the time gap between first and second marriages. The main cause of this was the Venetian dating system, which began the year on 1 March. A marriage could in theory last from 25th April 1633, the date of the marriage, to 13th February 1633, when the husband died, for example. The problem of Venetian names also had to be tackled in this thesis. When Isabetta Zorzi and Elisabetta Giorgio can be the same person, and spellings can vary even within one document, trying to trace individuals can be a difficult task. Therefore, unless stated, names are referenced as they were found in the original source document and have not been standardised.

While by no means all the problems associated with statistical analysis have been covered here, and many of those encountered in this study have been explained in detail alongside the related material, the purpose of mentioning such problems here is to make those intending to use Venetian material for the study of widowhood more aware of some of the pitfalls.

## **Conclusion.**

This thesis has used a large number and wide range of sources. While part of the aim of this chapter was to explain what sources have been discovered, and how they have been used within the context of the research, it was also the intention to indicate some other sources which are available for the study of widowhood, and to suggest how they might be used in the future. I

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<sup>47</sup> The databases of widows' wills and those of marriage information are not included within this thesis because they are only of use in their electronic form.

<sup>48</sup> See Chapters 6 and 8 for more detail on the discrepancies between the various sources of information on marriage and remarriage.



have not attempted to cover every source as, in fact, almost any material for study of Venetian history, with perhaps the exception of certain government sources, can provide information about the life of widows, but just to offer suggestions about particularly useful ones, which this thesis has not been able to make use of to their full potential. The sources are plentiful and bountiful, but not without their problems. They offer insight into many areas of widows' lives, but there are certain aspects which remain un-illuminated simply because of a lack of suitable sources. What is most evident is that there is great scope for further work on the study of widowhood in Venice and that the sources are there to facilitate this.



### Widows and the Law – Chapter 3

From its outset, any discussion of widows and the law has to take into account the fact that widows were affected by laws aimed at a number of social categories. Firstly widows were women, and thus subject to the majority of the patriarchally devised laws which both ‘protected’ and restricted women in the early modern period. Secondly they were women without husbands, and often without fathers, and therefore in the eyes of the law both in need of male guidance on legal matters, and also sources of potential trouble, who might use this independence from male control to misuse whatever patrimony they had power over. Thirdly, widows had their own legal identity which separated them from all other single women and they often had some control of property and a possibility for agency not available to other women. Widows were therefore subject to a number of additional laws, and the restrictions of others were removed. They had legal rights with regard to inheritance, guardianship and administration of property, but were always at a disadvantage to men who could not admit the possibility of legal equality to women, however rich, powerful, influential or wise.

A study of the legal situation faced by widows in early modern Venice is not enough in itself to give a rounded view of the status of widows within that society, but it is essential to this thesis as a whole as it offers a framework for material on family, finance and remarriage. Wyntjes has emphasised the importance of a legal understanding saying that “widows’ legal rights, exercised within and outside the family sphere, were the basis of their visible authority and power during the early modern period”.<sup>1</sup> This is only an acceptable basis for study if it is taken into account that the majority of the power and authority held by widows, and other women in the period, was not visible.

What this chapter aims to illuminate is the relative restrictions and freedoms which affected widows in early modern Venice. There are two aspects which need to be examined: firstly what laws widows were subject to and secondly how far personal factors, such as relationship with family and social position, could affect the way the law worked for the individual.<sup>2</sup> Ideally widows could make the laws designed to protect them work efficiently, while finding ways to circumnavigate those designed to restrict their activities. Comparisons will be made with Florence and other European locations and this chapter will conclude by considering what the laws reveal about the law-makers’ views of widows, and what the way in

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<sup>1</sup> S. M. Wyntjes, ‘Survivors and Status’, p. 396.

<sup>2</sup> All Venetian laws quoted in this chapter, and not footnoted otherwise, have been taken from the *Compilazione delle Leggi*, the eighteenth century survey of Venetian laws.



which widows negotiated the legal system indicates about their abilities and social standing in Venice.

It is impossible to get a clear picture of the legal position for the widow in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries without first examining how she was treated as a woman, and more particularly as a married woman. By its very nature, widowhood was a result of the woman's relationship with her husband, and specifically the fact that she had outlived him. The way in which the marriage was conducted affected how the widowhood developed. A wealthy bride, who played a role in household finance, produced an heir and had a long and affectionate relationship with her husband would probably face far fewer legal difficulties on widowhood than would the young widow who faced pressure from both natal and marital families, but no real support. Although law in itself is a definable entity, the way in which the law worked for each widow varied greatly due to a number of factors which will become more apparent as the study progresses.

What becomes clear immediately from a survey of secondary sources, is that the majority of historians who have studied this topic feel that Venetian women were treated comparatively well by the law.<sup>3</sup> In Florence women were required to have a male legal representative, the *mundualdus*, whatever their marital status, although Rosenthal suggests that this requirement was not always adhered to in practice.<sup>4</sup> In Venice this was not the case, even theoretically. Florentine women were also disadvantaged in law in other ways, for example by the fact that, once dowered, they were excluded from other inheritance, but again Venetian law was different and theoretically women could inherit if there was no male heir.<sup>5</sup>

From biblical times widows had been regarded as part of the deserving poor, *personae miserabiles*, and in 1140 Gratian noted that widows were among those whom the church was

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ASV, Compilazione delle Leggi, B. 187, 277 and 366.

<sup>3</sup> J. C. Davis notes that "Venetian law codes protected women's interests somewhat better than the law codes did in most other regions of male inheritance". - J. C. Davis, *A Venetian Family and its Fortune*, p. 89.

C. Calisse agrees, stating that the Venetian territories "gave woman constantly greater independence in respect to her civil acts". - C. Calisse, *History of Italian Law*, p. 522.

<sup>4</sup> E. G. Rosenthal, 'The Position of Women', p. 377.

<sup>5</sup> I. Chabot examines in more detail the question of the differences between Florentine and Venetian traditions of inheritance and concludes that Florence and Venice in fact had diverse systems of marriage and inheritance, yet there remains validity in making comparisons because of the at least superficial similarities. Chabot also notes that Venetian wives enjoyed patrimonial rights inconceivable elsewhere.

I. Chabot, 'Risorse e Diritti Patrimoniali', p. 49-60. For a discussion of the Florentine inheritance system and the exclusion of daughters from inheritance who had already been dowered see T. Kuehn, 'Some Ambiguities', p. 11-36.



obliged to defend. Later civil courts also had an obligation to protect widows.<sup>6</sup> This definition of widows as deserving and in need of protection was influential in a number of the Venetian laws but there was also another perspective which affected laws on widowhood. Particularly evident from Klapisch-Zuber's work on Florence is the fact that widows were also regarded as a threat, to moral health, to family make-up and most importantly to patrimony. This was a fear which permeated both the widow's natal and marital families. Her natal family were concerned that the part of the patrimony invested in her dowry would be forfeit to her new family if she did not return home. The marital family feared the removal of the dowry from their own patrimony into which it had been incorporated on marriage. Another worry which arose particularly in France was concern that the widow, who often kept at least partial guardianship of children even if she remarried, would divert the resources meant for existing children to the new husband and future offspring.<sup>7</sup> It was these anxieties that led to restrictions in some places on the amount of control widows could have over property. Thus it can be seen that laws relating to widowhood come from two angles, one aiming to protect widows, the other to restrict their agency.

The most significant Venetian laws concerning widows related to inheritance and dowry control. In Venice, inheritance was not based on primogeniture but on equal shares between male heirs, with girls getting an equal share only of their mother's property. In practice, among the sixteenth-century patriciate, this meant that the one or two sons who married became the heirs, and other, unmarried, sons, although getting their shares in their lifetimes, returned them to the central patrimony on their deaths. The policy of restricted marriage for both sons and daughters is discussed more fully in Chapter 6 but its significance here is that, with some girls not marrying, those who did marry could receive larger dowries, which in turn could become large payouts on widowhood. Under Venetian law females could inherit if there were no male heirs and they could hold and administer property, although it was usual for women to have a legal representative, be it husband, father or son.<sup>8</sup>

Venetian women had a legal right to a dowry and fathers were obliged to provide for their daughters in some way, even if, by the late sixteenth century, that just meant

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<sup>6</sup> Brundage notes that Gratian considered the issue of widowhood protection in his *Concordia Discordantium Canonum*. J. A. Brundage, 'Widows as Disadvantaged Persons', p. 194.

<sup>7</sup> Diefendorf explains the situation for Paris where, in 1510, a law was introduced meaning that donations could not be made between new spouses which disadvantaged the heirs. The 1560 version of the law was more specifically aimed at preventing widows from entrusting the property of the heirs to a new husband. B. Diefendorf, 'Widowhood and Remarriage', p. 385-390.

<sup>8</sup> For more detail on the inheritance rights of widows elsewhere in early modern Europe see S. M. Wyntjes, 'Survivors and Status', p. 396-405. D. Hempenius van Dijk, 'Widows and the Law', p. 89-102. J. Hardwick, 'Widowhood and Patriarchy', p. 133-148.



accommodation at home. More frequently it meant a marital or spiritual dowry. Often dowries were the daughters' only share of the patrimony, and brothers inheriting were legally obliged to provide for unmarried girls. Girls not receiving their fair portion could take the issue to arbitration, although there were certainly difficulties in getting legal advice without family support. Work by Bellavitis has already offered some insight into the dowry situation in early modern Venice, and Chojnacki has considered the question of the dowry, its composition and uses for an earlier period.<sup>9</sup> By looking at who, besides the father or brothers, made contributions to dowries in the Renaissance, he has discovered that contributions from other family members, as much as from fathers, accelerated the dowry inflation of the period. Women were donating to the dowries of other women, perhaps because they realised the importance of a large dowry and a good marriage, and this was as significant in dowry inflation as fathers appreciating the political advantages of an expensive match.

Although the make-up of contributions to dowries is not of importance here, the fact of dowry inflation is crucial to an understanding of the financial and social position of particularly patrician women in the period. The rate at which it was rising, and the concern this caused many patricians is evident from the sumptuary laws of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which aimed to limit it. The first limit, of 1,600 ducats for nobles and 2,000 for non-nobles in 1420 also noted that one third of that was permanently alienated (the *corredum*). But after the limit increased again, to 3,000 in 1505 and 4,000 in 1535, the 'third' was limited to 1,000 ducats. Although the main aim of this restriction of the third to 1000 ducats was an attempt by families to stop too much of the patrimony being permanently alienated, it benefited those widows who did regain their dowries, as they lost only an increasingly small proportion of it. In 1551 the dowry limit was raised again to 5,000 ducats before it finally settled at 6,000 in 1575. These Venetian attempts to limit the dowry failed quite conclusively and even in the fifteenth century, dowries were greatly exceeding limits. Widows, however, could claim back the value of the true dowry, even if it was above the legal limit, and even if the amount registered was false.

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<sup>9</sup> Anna Bellavitis has made an interesting and comprehensive study of the Venetian laws surrounding dowry entitlement, management and reclamation, also examining the procedure for reclamation but she has not considered the significance of the legislation for the position of the Venetian widow. The aim of the examination of this material here is to see how it worked and to question its significance in relation to this thesis. A. Bellavitis, 'La Famiglia "Cittadina"', p. 55-69.

S. Chojnacki, 'Dowries and Kinsmen', p. 571-600.

S. Chojnacki, 'Patrician Women', p. 176-203.

S. Chojnacki, 'Marriage Legislation'

See also D. E. Queller and T. F. Madden, 'Father of the Bride', p. 685-712.



On remarriage widows were not, in fact, required to stick to the legal limit, and the same leniency was allowed to other heiresses.<sup>10</sup> This can be seen in sixteenth-century marriage contracts where widows often quote far higher dowries but, strangely, by the early seventeenth century, widows, as well as other women, in the officially registered contracts, all seem to stick to the 6,000 limit.<sup>11</sup> An example from the 1590s shows widow Girolama Boldu with a dowry of 33,000 ducats, indicating that dowries of this size did exist.<sup>12</sup> However, when widows' contracts were looked at for the 1630s, of the 42 considered, 32 of those stated the dowry as exactly 6,000 ducats "according to the law" and only two were noted as exceeding the limit.<sup>13</sup> The desire to appear to stick to the law, perhaps resulting from more strict enforcement, had appeared in the intervening years. The limitation of dowries was an attempt to restrict the property-holding power of widows, and to stop too much property from passing out of the lineage through female hands. Queller and Madden, although commenting on an earlier period, also suggest that by restricting dowry size, men were trying to limit the chances of dishonour for those nobles who could not keep up.<sup>14</sup> A consequence for widows of the inflation was that the fewer dowries were given, the greater their individual value and the more property concentrated in the hands of a few widows.

The real importance of dowry legislation for a study of widowhood comes in the reclamation process. Rights to property on widowhood differed throughout Europe. In France, for example, a widow could claim lineage property, dower rights (subsistence), and half of community property, although dowries were small and not given in lieu of patrimony.<sup>15</sup> In England a widow could inherit up to half of all her husband's property, if there were no children.<sup>16</sup> Florence was similar to Venice in allowing the widow only the dowry by right, from her husband's property, but in addition the widow was entitled to return to the parental home

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<sup>10</sup> ASV, Compilazione delle Leggi, B. 186, p. 80. Section marked Cons. 1420. 22 agosto, C. 160to.

<sup>11</sup> In family contracts kept privately it is evident that these limits were exceeded as much as fivefold. See ASV, Archivio Privato, Archivio Tiepolo, series 1, B. 1. Two documents dated 26 September 1608 both claim to be the marriage contract of Domenico Trevisan and Dona Tiepolo: however, one notes a dowry of 22,000 ducats and the other a dowry of 6,000 ducats. One was clearly to be officially registered, noting the legal limit; the other indicated the value of the true dowry given.

<sup>12</sup> For details of the marriage contract of Girolama Boldu, see ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, B. 114/4, 1592-1604, no. 688. For other examples see ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, B. 113/3, 1583-1592, no. 590, and B. 114/4, no. 734, for the second and third marriage contracts of Maddalena Dandolo.

<sup>13</sup> For marriage contracts from the 1630s see ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, B. 117/7, 1623-1634 and B. 118/8, 1634-1645.

<sup>14</sup> D. F. Queller and T. F. Madden, 'Father of the Bride', p. 706.

<sup>15</sup> B. Diefendorf, 'Widowhood and Remarriage', p. 383.

<sup>16</sup> O. Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her*, p. 224.



(*tornate*) and to be given basic living costs (*alimenti*).<sup>17</sup> Although the difficulties in gaining these rights and the implications of the various systems of marital inheritance for places other than Venice will not be discussed in detail here, it is interesting just to see how they differed from the legal rights in Venice. Consideration of how these systems functioned is crucial for a true understanding of the position of the widows, but even the laws in themselves are interesting as an insight into the priorities of the legislators.<sup>18</sup>

In Venice, although the dowry remained the property of the wife during marriage, it was under the control of the husband.<sup>19</sup> He was entitled to use the profits from it but if anything was sold from the dotal property then he had to deposit an equivalent sum with the *Procuratori di S. Marco*. In fact if the woman feared for her dowry she could demand insurance of it under law and it could be ‘ring-fenced’ by the court to prevent the husband from disposing of it. There are many references to this process within the Venetian dowry legislation both for when a husband was facing poverty and for when he was putting his wife’s dotal goods at risk in other ways.<sup>20</sup> Further to the dowry, wives could also have portions of property known as the *Dimissoria*, or *Parafernali*, still partially controlled by the husband, and the *Beni Particolari* which were under neither the possession or control of the husband.<sup>21</sup> This was the situation for the wife’s goods during the marriage.

Up to one year and a day after the death of her husband the Venetian widow could appeal to the justices for the return of her dowry. Until the demand was made she was entitled to take a basic living from the property of her husband, and after the claim she was still entitled to live in his property until the dowry was repaid, although without living costs.<sup>22</sup> If there were underage children then she was entitled to remain until they came of age.<sup>23</sup> If the house had to be sold for

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<sup>17</sup> E. G. Rosenthal, ‘The Position of Women’, p. 369.

<sup>18</sup> For comment on the workings of the dowry return and marital inheritance systems in Florence see, G. Calvi, ‘Maddalena Nerli and Cosimo Tornabuoni’, p. 312-337. Also I. Chabot, ‘Widowhood and Poverty’, p. 291-311, and ‘Risorse e Diritti Patrimoniali’. All comment that it was not unusual for widows to have problems regaining their goods from the husband’s families.

For consideration of the position in France see J. Hardwick, ‘Widowhood and Patriarchy’, p. 133-148 on the division of the husband’s estate, B. Diefendorf, ‘Widowhood and Remarriage’, p. 379-95, on the widow’s legal rights to property and H. A. Miskimin, ‘Widows not so Merry’, p. 207-219, for evidence of widows challenging families in court for dower rights.

<sup>19</sup> Marco Ferro, *Dizionario*, section on Beni Dotali, p. 262.

<sup>20</sup> ASV, Compilazione delle Leggi, B. 186, p. 134 v. Statuto Veneto Lib’ 1 Cap’ 62. and p. 84. Conf’ 1553, 4 Nov.’ C.159.

<sup>21</sup> For greater detail about the rights of the husband and wife to the various portions of her property see Marco Ferro, *Dizionario*, sections on Dote, p. 640, Dimissoria, p. 596, Parafernali and Mobili p. 276 in volumes 1 and 2.

<sup>22</sup> ASV, Compilazione delle Leggi, B. 186, p. 134 v. Statuto Veneto Lib’ 1, Cap’ 60.

<sup>23</sup> ASV, Compilazione delle Leggi, B. 186, p. 76 v. Lib’ 4, Cap’ 34, C. 65.



the dowry of a daughter in the meantime then the widow was entitled to claim shelter from the husband's estate. Husband's wills sometimes granted the widow '*Donna et Madonna*', and in such cases the widow retained control of the family anyway. If the widow regained her dowry and yet still continued to live in her husband's house without agreement, however, then she had only two months before she was forcibly evicted.<sup>24</sup>

Apart from these rights to shelter and subsistence for a limited period of time, the widow had no rights to any of her husband's property, only to the return of her own dowry; however, the return of it was taken seriously by the Venetian legislators. As noted already the dowry was guaranteed by the husband and his family, and it was also noted in law as the most important debt on the husband's estate.

La Dote è anziana a tutti gli altri crediti nati a  
carico del marito dopo il matrimonio.<sup>25</sup>

Dowry controls and reclamation aims show the legislators complying with this tendency for laws to try to protect the widow, however difficult the practical realities of reclamation were.<sup>26</sup>

Once her husband was dead the widow wanting to reclaim her dowry had a year and a day to do so. She had to place her request for reclamation, the *Vadimonio*, with the *Giudici del Proprio* and this could be done in a variety of ways. Most commonly *Carte di Dote* and *Contratti di Nozze* were produced by the widow to prove the amount and authenticity of her claim. Additionally she could use an inventory created by her husband with a notary, which noted dowry amount, or a will in which the dowry amount was confessed. Another form of written confirmation signed by her husband would also have been adequate. If none of these was available then the widow could finally call on witnesses who would testify to the amount of the dowry and the fact that it had been received by her husband.<sup>27</sup> Even beginning the reclamation process could be difficult, but this didn't stop the yearly numbers reclaiming remaining high throughout the early modern period.

Once the *Vadimonio* had been approved, payment was to be made first from movable property (*Mobili*), as there was a reluctance to pass buildings and land to women and away from the patrimony. If there was not enough movable property then buildings and land outside Venice

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<sup>24</sup> ASV, Compilazione delle Leggi, B. 186, p. 160. Statuto Veneto Lib' 6, Cap' 17.

<sup>25</sup> Marco Ferro, *Dizionario*, section entitled 'Credito'.

<sup>26</sup> ASV, Compilazione delle Leggi, B. 186, p. 118, Statuto Veneto, Lib' 1 Cap' 34. This statute states that the widow is the first creditor of the husband's estate, senior to all other creditors who, subsequent to the marriage, had made contracts with her husband.

<sup>27</sup> Giovanni Donato, *Prattica Civile*, p. 138.



(*Stabili di Fuori*) were next divided and finally, only when completely necessary, properties within Venice (*Stabili della Città*) were divided.<sup>28</sup> If there was family co-operation and agreement then the division of property for dowry payment could be a relatively painless affair, but the need for official valuation was amply catered for in the legislation. Justices could call on experts to estimate the value of property within Venice and the responsibility for valuation passed to regional magistrates outside Venice.<sup>29</sup> The ‘*stride*’, literally meaning ‘screeching’, allowed both the widow herself and other creditors to her husband’s estate to complain about the valuations, even if partial repayment had already begun; and up to three re-estimations of the value could be made, with experts from both sides, and a neutral one if necessary.<sup>30</sup> Even once the amount of payment was agreed, though, it could still take many years for the process to be completed; however, the formal acceptance of such problems by the legislators suggests that they were prepared to support the widow who faced hostility from her marital kin.

A total of one hundred cases taken from the records of the *Giudici del Proprio* recorded in the 1630s were used for this investigation, and it was possible to follow more than three quarters of these through to their at least partial conclusion.<sup>31</sup> 61 of those dowry requests placed by widows were attended to within a year.

	Number of cases	Percentage of cases
Payment = total amount requested	11	18.02%
Payment = more than total amount requested	12	19.66%
Payment = more than 2/3 of total amount requested	17	27.89%
Payment = less than 2/3 of total amount requested	18	29.51%
Payment amount unclear	3	4.92%
Total	61	100%

**Table 3.1** showing, from the total number of cases of dowry reclamation concluded in under a year, the payments received.

<sup>28</sup> See Chapter 4 for a more detailed examination of how the property was actually divided.  
<sup>29</sup> Giovanni Donato, *Prattica Civile*, pp. 140-144.  
<sup>30</sup> Giovanni Donato, *Prattica Civile*, pp. 145-166. The details about the reclamation process continue in Donato’s *Prattica Civile*, for a further 19 pages after the initial descriptions of the process have been offered. Every eventuality is covered.  
<sup>31</sup> Chapter 2 contains more detail about the workings of the Giudici del Proprio archives and details of the exact records used are in Chapter 2, footnote 9.  
 See Chapter 4 for a more thorough examination of the exact amounts reclaimed.



	Number of Cases	Percentage of cases
Payment = total amount requested	0	0%
Payment = more than total amount requested	5	31.25%
Payment = more than 2/3 of total amount requested	3	18.75%
Payment = less than 2/3 of total amount requested	6	37.5%
Payment amount unclear	2	12.5%
Total	16	100%

**Table 3.2** showing, from the total number of cases of dowry reclamation taking longer than a year to conclude, the payouts received.

What these figures show is firstly that those widows petitioning for the return of their dowries stood a pretty good chance of their case being concluded, and within a relatively short space of time. Even among those whose cases took over a year, most were concluded within three years. In those cases where it appears that less than that amount has been returned it may well be that more was returned to the widow in documents dated much later and thus not discovered by the survey. Reclamation amounts must therefore be regarded as a conservative estimate. The figures on cases taking more than a year to resolve do suggest that the longer it took the less likely was the widow to receive the exact amount, but also the more likely she was to receive more than the original request. It is important to note here that the payment of the dowry to the husband in the first place may have been a long process, not necessarily completed by the time of widowhood, and that this would have been taken into account in the reclamation process.

We can see that women were prepared to petition for their dowries and that they felt the return rate was good enough to make the legal process worthwhile. The law was working for them, and protecting their property rights to a reasonable level and they were sometimes gaining more through the official channels than they requested in the first place. Although only 77% of those making requests appear to have concluded negotiations for the return of their dowries, some may have been persuaded to drop their requests, others may have concluded the settlements much later. It is also clear from other records in the *Giudici del Proprio* that it was not just



widows who had to petition to get their rightly inherited property and that male heirs could have equal difficulties. Widows' rights were not ignored, but were served relatively well by the legal system considering the continuing importance of conservation of the patrimony.

This property ownership could be used as a source of power and wills were a particularly important means of legal influence. The right to make a will was accorded to all women in early modern Venice and through their wills widows were able to influence the dowry size of daughters and other female relatives, reward faithful servants, make gifts to friends and natal and marital relatives, and make arrangements for their funerals. In exceptional cases, widows could use their wills as a means of having legal influence over their families too. An interesting example of how a widow could use reclaimed dotal property, through a will, to assert legal influence over her family is the case of Giulia Barbo.<sup>32</sup> In a series of four wills in the late 1500s, she threatened to disinherit one, or both of her sons if they married Bertola Bocheri, Chiara Dalogio or Paulina Michiel, whom she called whores! In addition to this threat was that of the removal of one piece of inheritance each time she found out that her son Zuanne Francesco had been in contact with Molina Contarini. Interestingly she failed in her attempts to manipulate him and he did indeed marry Molina, but the threat of disinheritance may have worked in other families, allowing widows to control relatives who they were not able to persuade in other ways. The widow's right to make a will and dispose of her property as she chose could be instrumental in allowing her to maintain some position of respect and influence in a family where officially she may have had no power.

Wills were also influential on the life of the widow through bequests to her, and not only those from her husband, although they were the most important. Throughout married life, women were legally able to own and control the amounts that they were bequeathed and this ability gave them experience in property-ownership and may also have shown widows the advantages of holding property, encouraging them to reclaim their dowries.

The will of the husband could be 'make or break' for the widow, particularly as the dowry was the only legal entitlement she had and was not always sufficient to live on. While the financial benefits received by widows from their husbands will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, the interest here is in the legal authority which husbands granted their wives in their testaments. A small sample of fifteen wills was used to take a simple survey and while only three women were granted the official title of '*Donna et Madonna*', the majority were given

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<sup>32</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile, Testamenti, Atti Crivelli, B. 222, no. 969. Giulia Barbo, widow.



responsibility for guardianship of children and as executors of the will.<sup>33</sup> In fact one third of wives were given sole executorship and a further third were noted as the most important of the executors. Among the remaining five examples one was unclear and another indicated the wife's parents as joint executors with the wife. The majority of the men whose wills were considered wanted their wives to be heavily involved in the division of property and the execution of their wishes.<sup>34</sup>

When considering property we can again see the degree of responsibility which husbands were prepared to accord their wives on widowhood. Only one was granted just her dowry, minus the third which the law decreed, and the rest were given at least the dowry as well as additional property or even the *Residuo* of the husband's estate. There were also surprisingly few conditions attached to these bequests, even relating to remarriage, although it was perhaps automatically assumed that remarriage would mean loss of any additional revenue. More frequently responsibility beyond the legal requirements was accorded to these women, rather than additional restrictions on what they could do.

The ability of widows to control the property that they gained by right from their dowries, or by gift through bequests, was crucial to the chance of independent activity. In Florence where legal representation was always required, women had less opportunity to act independently than in Venice where, although frequently widows did ask for the advice and assistance of male relatives, they were able to act alone and could be influential. One place where this has been seen to a relatively large extent is in marriage contracts. In a survey of marriage contracts taken for the 1590s and 1630s it was found that as many as 13% of contracts involved the direct intervention of widows on behalf of their daughters, with two cases where the widows were involved on behalf of their sons.<sup>35</sup> Many widows were also involved in the creation of their own contracts for remarriage. Figures for Venice in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries suggest over two thirds signed their own contracts.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Details of all the men's wills sampled for this thesis are found in Chapter 2, footnote 16. For details of how the sample was taken see Chapter 2's section on Statistical Data.

<sup>34</sup> S. Chojnacki, 'The Power of Love', p. 126-148. Chojnacki concludes that the growing frequency with which executorship is given to the wife means that husbands and wives were showing increased marital affection.

<sup>35</sup> For example ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, B. 114'4, 1592-1604, no. 696, contract of Andrea Pesaro marrying Elisabetta Corner, and B. 113'3, 1583-1592, no. 578, contract of Alessandro Trevisan marrying Paolina Moro.

The contracts sampled here are the same as those used for the compilation of remarriage rates in Chapter 6. See Chapter 2, footnote 29 for details on the contracts used.

<sup>36</sup> Information on the marriage contracts used and the exact numbers signing is found in Table 4.4, Chapter 4.



Widows were not prepared to let such matters as their own marriages be handled by distant family members and they were considered capable, in the eyes of the law, of participating actively. Some interesting examples show that they sometimes made active demands about their second marriages. Maria da Lezze, marrying Carlo Foscari, demanded in the marriage contract that,

altri ducati 577, grossi 11, li quali esso Clarissimo Signor Carlo debba depositar in banco o cerca da esser investidir insieme con li sopra detti denari che si riscoterano dalli sopradetti Clarissimi Bragadini. il frutto di quanto sia e debba esser libera di essa Clarissima Madonna Maria.<sup>37</sup>

Andrianna Malipiero, marrying Lorenzo Diedo, made provision in the contract saying that, as she had already lost one ‘terzo’, of 1,000 ducats on the dowry to her first husband, she would not be required to forfeit any more of her 11,000 ducat dowry.<sup>38</sup>

Widows also created *livelli*, bought and sold property and paid tax, on very small, and also very large amounts of property.<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to compare widows’ property ownership and control in Venice with that elsewhere and on the whole it does not compare unfavourably. In Florence, the possibility for property inheritance from husbands was much the same as in Venice and women did control the property of entire families.<sup>40</sup> English widows could take absolute possession of their husband’s property if there were no other potential heirs and they acted in a variety of legal capacities, as moneylenders and landlords. By the late seventeenth century they were also involved in the purchase of government stock.<sup>41</sup> In France, widows could also become heads of households and manage property, although Hardwick notes that few had enough property to be really independent and that their authority was often challenged.<sup>42</sup> They also had the right to denounce the estate if they felt it would leave them at a loss. French widows had an independent legal personality and could control property but often only did so until the majority of the eldest son. Not all wanted the burden of property administration and were prepared to relinquish their powers to a son they trusted.

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<sup>37</sup> ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, B. 114/4, no. 641.

<sup>38</sup> ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, B. 113/3, no. 583.

<sup>39</sup> See Chapter 4, footnote 30 for details of how the *livelli* system of loans operated.

<sup>40</sup> Maddalena Nerli, as ‘donna di governo’ controlled family property until her death despite the existence of male heirs. G. Calvi, ‘Maddalena Nerli and Cosimo Tornabuoni’, p. 312-337.

<sup>41</sup> B. A. Holderness, ‘Widows in Pre-Industrial Society’, p. 423-442, esp., p. 431-437.

<sup>42</sup> J. Hardwick, ‘Widowhood and Patriarchy’, p. 133.



Perhaps the most important legal issue for many widows after the question of dowry and inheritance was guardianship of children. Despite the fuss made about the abandonment of children by mothers who regained their dowries in the work of Klapisch-Zuber. Chabot suggests that in fact mothers, particularly those named as '*Domina*', were usually guardians of their children, a fact which is backed up by Morten Crabb's figure of seven in ten widows as guardians in fifteenth-century Florence.<sup>43</sup> In Friesland it appears that widows were also almost always legal guardians of their children.<sup>44</sup> From fifteen examples of husbands' wills for Venice, all those men with children left them under the control of the mother, sometimes with specific requirements that she be obeyed. Wills also sometimes gave the widow authority to decide the appropriate amount for her daughter's dowry, to chose her vocation, or even to reject her son's choice of potential wife.<sup>45</sup> Residence statistics also show that children in Venice normally lived with their widowed mothers, which adds weight to the evidence found in wills.<sup>46</sup>

Remarriage could mean loss of guardianship, as well as financial benefits, for widows but even under these circumstances some widows were able to control the situation, as did Vettoria Desiderati when she made guardianship of her son obligatory for her second husband within the marriage contract.<sup>47</sup> Nor did loss of guardianship have to be against the wishes of the widow, who may have felt unable to cope with control of a family.<sup>48</sup> By forcibly removing legal guardianship, the family would have been encouraging the widow to leave and take her dowry

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<sup>43</sup> C. Klapisch-Zuber, "The Cruel Mother", p. 117-131.

I. Chabot, 'Risorse e Diritti Patrimoniali', p. 68.

A. Morten Crabb, 'How Typical was Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi', p. 51.

<sup>44</sup> D. Hempenius-van-Dijk, 'Widows and the Law', p. 94.

<sup>45</sup> See examples of wives being given control over children in the wills of Giovanni Cortese - ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Brinis Girolamo, B. 32, no. 443, and of Gio Alberto Dal Basso - ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Secco, B. 1191, n. 295.

<sup>46</sup> Monica Chojnacka, in her PhD thesis, shows that, of all household headed by widows, 50% housed widows living alone with their children. M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*, p. 238.

See Chapter 5 for a full discussion of the question of guardianship of children.

<sup>47</sup> The marriage contract makes it clear that Vettoria was placing her son from her first marriage at the centre of any agreement made. Within the contract provision was made for his care. "Che esso Clarissimo sposo si tenuto et obligato a spesar et mantener Francesco, fiolo de detta Magnifica sposa nato in primo voto con il Clarissimo Signor Francesco Tiepolo fu del Clarissimo Girolamo quanto fusse suo proprio fiolo, et che in tempo alcuno esso Signor sposo non possi pretendene dimandar cosa alcuna suoi heredi per rifactione di spese fatto per conto di detto fiol". ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, B. 114/4, no. 643. A similar clause is noted in the contract between Caterina Priuli and Leonardo Zane, ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, B. 113/3, no. 559. This gives credence to the idea that Venetian men were, on occasion, prepared to bring up the children of other men.

<sup>48</sup> Laura, wife of Lorenzo Dona, was granted an extra 100 ducats a year if she could not live with her children. ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Secco, B. 1192, no. 425. Giovanni Cortese accepted that children did not always respect their mother, his wife Marietta, and allowed her an additional 70 ducats a year if she lived apart from them, although if she remarried her children were only obliged to return her dowry. ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Brinis Girolamo, B. 32, no. 443.



with her. As the widow had the right to remain in the family house as long as she did not remarry and the children were underage, there was no material advantage for her in leaving and many extended families were not keen to take extra children in to their households, not least because of the reluctance to bring up girls and boys together who were not directly related.

Who the widow could and could not marry is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6 but it must be noted here that even in marriage there were a number of restrictions placed on the widow over and above the usual ones of consanguinity. Because a woman was felt to become a member of her husband's family on marriage, to marry one of his brothers, or even his father after her widowhood was felt to be incestuous. Levirate marriage, where a woman passed from brother to brother, was not acceptable, but Canon 3 of the 24th session of the Council of Trent establishes clearly the church's right to dispose of or extend the rules of consanguinity.<sup>49</sup> In a small number of cases, where property was involved, special dispensations were granted, although the penalties for breaking the rules without dispensation were harsh.<sup>50</sup>

Laws of less intrinsic importance which affected the widow included those controlling consumption. Set down from the thirteenth century, and executed from the fifteenth by the *Provveditori Sopra le Pompe*, sumptuary legislation was particularly relevant to women as it controlled clothing, a common means of female spending and display. While few laws referred to widows specifically, they were affected by legislation on all aspects of female clothing, including veils, sleeves and shoes. Specific regulation on mourning wear was issued after the plague of 1347-8, actually prohibiting the wearing of mourning clothes, because of fears that the entire city would be wearing black, dark green and dark blue.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, though, this did not apply to women over fifty, whose daily wear, even when there was no plague, was often that of mourning anyway. Mourning wear was also prohibited at feasts, when the Venetian government wanted to impress foreign visitors.<sup>52</sup> A further piece of legislation affecting widows was that on veils, introduced in August 1443. Whereas prescriptive writers encouraged the wearing of veils, covering the head if not the face, as a sign of modesty, some legislators saw them as a threat of potential subversion.<sup>53</sup> Widows did continue to wear veils, but were never pictured with them covering the face.<sup>54</sup> All sumptuary legislation was difficult to enforce however, and would only have affected a small number of Venetian widows.

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<sup>49</sup> H. J. Schroeder, *The Canons and Decrees*, p. 181.

<sup>50</sup> H. J. Schroeder, *The Canons and Decrees*, p. 187.

<sup>51</sup> M. Newett, 'The Sumptuary Laws of Venice', p. 267.

<sup>52</sup> M. Newett, 'The Sumptuary Laws of Venice', p. 250.

<sup>53</sup> M. Newett, 'The Sumptuary Laws of Venice', p. 268.

<sup>54</sup> See Chapter 7 for images of the widow as portrayed in costume books.



The majority of the legal dealings of widows, or of anyone else in the early modern period, were carried out through notaries who made and recorded contracts and wills, but on occasion widows did have to appear in the courts in Venice as well. Ruggiero has been particularly active in looking at women in court records for this period, as victims, defendants and witnesses. Coming across many women in his study of sex crimes, he suggests that often “the victimisation of women was just not significant enough to warrant serious concern” and notes that widows were the least valued as victims.<sup>55</sup> Wives and nubile daughters both held status, and an attack on a daughter was damaging to family fortunes, and an affront to her father, just as an attack on a wife was a direct insult to the name of the husband, but the widow did not hold such a valued position. Ruggiero also points out that after marriage, records of sex crime were few, not suggesting that widows were not often attacked, (in fact, they must have been quite frequently victims), but that attacks on widows were not considered important enough to warrant recording, or even reporting.<sup>56</sup>

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, widows were considered particularly worthy of protection by the ecclesiastical courts. Ferraro notes that in Venice the ecclesiastical courts were the best place for women to seek protection when requiring separation from violent husbands, where men would go to secular courts.<sup>57</sup> A study of widows specifically has not yet been carried out but it seems likely that they would seek the same means of redress as other women. Perhaps if Ruggiero had used ecclesiastical records he would have found that more widows were evident as victims, but that they reported crimes committed against them to the courts they felt would be most sympathetic. In Florence a good example of this is the case of Lusanna, a widow who appealed to the ecclesiastical court, with the help of her brother.<sup>58</sup> This indicates that widows would sometimes appeal to ecclesiastical courts rather than secular ones in the hope of a fair trial. In France too it appears that widows, attempting to exploit the systems of justice, caused tension between secular and ecclesiastical courts.<sup>59</sup>

Widows as witnesses were evident in a surprisingly large variety of cases in the courts of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Venice, for example, in Inquisition cases and in the *Prove di Nobiltà* records of the *Avogaria di Comun*, used by Cowan.<sup>60</sup> Their testimonies were important

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<sup>55</sup> G. Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros*, p. 96.

<sup>56</sup> G. Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros*, p. 166.

<sup>57</sup> J. M. Ferraro, ‘The Power to Decide’, p. 497.

<sup>58</sup> G. Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna*.

<sup>59</sup> H. A. Miskimin, ‘Widows not so Merry’, p. 208.

<sup>60</sup> M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*, pp. 66-73.



too in the *Examinum Matrimoniorum* records found in the ACPV, where widows were sometimes required to testify that their husbands were really dead before they were given licence to remarry. Although these widows were required to provide two other witnesses to back up their stories, these could also be widows.<sup>61</sup> The frequency with which widows' testimonies appear is important for indicating their status in the courts. That they were involved in cases, and that they were believed, shows that their position as widows alone was not enough to make them considered untrustworthy. Chojnacka recognises that women were considered to be perfectly acceptable witnesses by the Venetian court system and that widows, enjoying perhaps more freedom of movement than other women, may have been particularly useful. Men's testimonies seem to have been taken no more seriously than were women's and the majority of witnesses in witchcraft trials, for example were in fact women.<sup>62</sup>

Use of the type of material found in this chapter does not come without its problems and it is as well that they are recognised here, in order to clarify the conclusions which have already been drawn. The first of these facing anyone attempting to use legal material in a historical thesis is well demonstrated by the legislation surrounding dowry limitation. It is necessary to have an understanding of the reasons behind the introduction of the legislation to put the law itself in context. The official reasons given for this legislation were that it was to protect families from having to give all their patrimony in dowries but we also have to take into account the underlying reasons. Encouragement of endogamous marriage seems to have also been a primary motive and Chojnacki suggests that it even more specifically related to endogamy within the old nobility.<sup>63</sup> Underlying this was also the aim of preventing too much wealth from being passed in female hands. The reasons stated in the statute books for the creation of the legislation are not always the only, or even the most important factors in their introduction.

A second problem for those studying law is that there are frequently exceptions to the rule. For example, the inheritance laws set out what widows could and should inherit or get back from their husband's estates, but without looking at widowhood property holding and at men's wills we cannot know how much was left to widows in addition to what they were given by law.

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A. Cowan, 'Love, Honour and the Avogaria di Comun', p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> Examples of widows as witnesses. In the case of Isabella, widow of Alvise Albertini, the second witness is Caterina, widow of Antonio de Osetini. Archivio Patriarcale, *Examinum Matrimoniorum*, B. 37 (1637-38), January 19, 1637, p. 242; also, from the same Busta, the case of Maddalena, widow of Bartolo Padrenti whose mother Anzola, widow of Vendramin Parcavoli, is called as a witness, p. 149.

<sup>62</sup> M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*, pp. 85-87.

<sup>63</sup> S. Chojnacki, 'Marriage Legislation', p. 176.



Connected to this is the third problem, that of discrepancy between theoretical law and the reality of its enforcement. A knowledge of the laws alone, while offering some insight, can distract from investigation of the true situation. Without a study of the cases and the results of applications for dowry reclamation for example, it is impossible to know how well the legislation to protect dowries, the guaranteed inheritance of the widow, functioned. Further, the law alone cannot tell us the amounts reclaimed as it has already been well documented that the Venetian patriciate did not stick to the limits it set for itself. Family support influenced the speed with which a dowry was returned and Kuehn has suggested that varying amounts of sympathy from lawyers towards female inheritance may have had an effect on the way inheritance cases were handled.<sup>64</sup> The difference between theory and application must be constantly in mind.

A further problem confronted by research of this type is that of the use of comparison. The law in one place may appear particularly favourable to widows but in practice may have disadvantaged them in ways which cannot be envisaged in a short overview. Conversely, widows seeming to do badly under the law may have been in situations where they were actually able to benefit from a seemingly negative system.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, we must consider other restrictions placed on the early modern widow which, while not legally binding, were enforced by church, family and professional bodies. The guilds had power to legislate, if only within their own professions, and they sometimes placed restrictions on the participation of women in their trades, including the widows of members. On some occasions legislation would allow the widow to continue working herself but not to take on apprentices. Other laws demanded that she have a journeyman to help her. One example shows how a widow could be refused entry into a guild unless she had sons.<sup>66</sup> How widows were treated depended very much on the trade, the economic climate and the location.<sup>67</sup> Brown has noted that in Florence more women entered the labour force when the power of the guilds was at its weakest.<sup>68</sup> The legislation on women's entry into the guilds is sometimes offered as a sign of the increasing restriction of female activity in the economic sphere; however, much female involvement was unofficial anyway.

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<sup>64</sup> T. Kuehn, 'Some Ambiguities in Female Inheritance Ideology', p.24-25.

<sup>65</sup> Inconsistencies between law and practice for women in Florence have been noted by Rosenthal. Despite the fact that they officially had no legal personality, notarial records show that some women were actually appointed as procurators (legal representatives) for others, suggesting that women actually had more legal agency than has been suggested in the past and than is evident from the statute alone. E. G. Rosenthal, 'The Position of Women in Renaissance Florence', p. 377.

<sup>66</sup> ASV, Arti, B. A129, Atti 1630-1660, 16th October 1635.

<sup>67</sup> L. Molà - Paper given to the University of Warwick in Venice Graduate Seminar, October 1997. See also his thesis - L. Molà, *The Silk Industry*.



The Church also had opinions on how widows should behave, and, although it could not enforce these officially, it used its influence to encourage widows into the chaste and quiet life. Even within convents widows were regulated, sometimes separated from virgins and occasionally not allowed to enter at all. Prescriptive literature often concurred with the views of the church, demanding celibacy of the good widow and chastising those who remarried, particularly at the expense of their children.<sup>69</sup> While religious pressure may have had some effect, however, the Church did not want to alienate widows, partly because sexual contact without marriage was still worse than remarriage and partly because it feared the loss of the revenue widows often created. Therefore remarriage was not banned, only discouraged.

Perhaps the body with most influence on the behaviour of the early modern widow, however, was the family. As already recognised for Florence, the family could control the destiny of a young widow, and could put great pressure on a widow of any age. Widows were influenced by both male and female relatives into new matches and by marital family to remain with them, but the true influence of family pressure cannot be measured. It has already been noted that wills could place the widow in a position where she had no choice but to comply or face destitution, but at least wills had some legal standing. Influence could be put on in other ways too, with emotional pressure playing a part. Fathers could convince widowed daughters that it was their duty to marry again for example, and widows sometimes gave up the most public aspects of their independence for the sake of freedom from family pressure.

How the law functioned for the Venetian widow depended on a number of things. Firstly wealth played a part. If a woman was from a wealthy family, it was less difficult for her to get a dowry of 'reasonable' size, although this was, of course, all relative. The natal family would be more prepared to take an interest in the way the dowry was maintained and insured during the marriage and would be more likely to support the widow in its reclamation, although maybe adding some pressure on her to remarry or to return the dowry to the family patrimony and live from an allowance. If the woman brought a large sum into the marriage, Chojnacki has suggested that she would receive more respect from her husband and his family, who would also be keen to make her happy to remain in the home after widowhood.<sup>70</sup> In addition, women from wealthy families were perhaps more likely to receive substantial bequests during marriage and thus would gain some experience in handling property. On widowhood, a widow with a large dowry to reclaim may have faced more pressure than one whose portion really made little difference to the

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<sup>68</sup> J. C. Brown, 'A Woman's Place was in the Home', p. 212-213.

<sup>69</sup> Prescriptive literature in general will be considered in Chapter 7.



financial situation of either family, but at the same time, the rewards for reclamation were much higher. The contrary view to this is of course that women from wealthy patrician families married younger, that affection was less important within the match and that additional properties and responsibility were not so frequently found in the wills of their husbands.

The second factor affecting a widow's ability to function in a legal capacity was age. The young widow, perhaps even below the age of legal majority for females, would have still been under the control of her natal family, and would have had little experience in handling her own legal matters. The young widow was also more likely to have had parents still alive to offer her assistance. Older widows were more likely to have had some experience in household management and a better idea of legal entitlements and their own wishes. While age could not prevent them from being made destitute or being placed in a position from which they had no escape, greater maturity would have given the widow increased ability to deal with the situation.

A third factor affecting the agency of the widow in legal matters was family, already established as potentially of great importance. While Klapisch-Zuber and Chabot among others have suggests that a woman's importance to a family was only as a way of transporting wealth and forming ties, Chojnacki and Martin, for Venice, have shown that the woman's role in the family was far more involved than that, and that emotional bonds between males and females, as well as female groups, were influential in the running of families.<sup>71</sup>

In the conclusion to this chapter we need to consider what the legal system in Venice shows about the legislators' attitudes towards widows, and also how the functioning of the legal system in cases involving widows gives an indication of the general situation for them. Duality of purpose in lawmaking was very evident in Venice. While laws on dowries attempted to prevent the ruin of families, they were also connected to the preservation of the patrician class. Laws on remarriage were about restricting the flow of patrimony away from the male line of one family, but also about concerns for neglect of children and fears about bigamy. While the dowry restrictions aimed to prevent the passage of too much wealth into female hands, the legislators accepted that the exceeding of those limits was not the fault of the widows and therefore they should not be punished for the actions of their fathers and husbands. There were elements of morality and fiscality, of protection and restriction.

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<sup>70</sup> S. Chojnacki, 'The Power of Love', p. 132.

<sup>71</sup> C. Klapisch-Zuber, "'The Cruel Mother'", p. 131. I. Chabot, 'Widowhood and Poverty', p. 298. S. Chojnacki. 'Patrician Women', p. 200. J. Martin, 'Out of the Shadow', p. 24.



The question of change over time must be raised too. In English law, the development, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of the law of equity was beneficial to widows.<sup>72</sup>

Although Calvi has suggested for Florence that by the seventeenth century it was becoming easier for women to reclaim their dowries, in Venice there was very little change in the dowry and marriage legislation that affected widows, except for the increases in the dowry limits.<sup>73</sup> Changes in Venice were perhaps more evident in the way the law was enforced rather than in the statutes themselves, with a turn, by the 1630s, towards the noting in registered contracts of the legal limit or less, whereas in the late sixteenth century, those exceeding the dowry limits, particularly widows, were not afraid to declare it in registered contracts. This suggests that the rules surrounding dowries were being enforced with increasing stringency.

In Venice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, widows were subject to a variety of laws, which affected them in a variety of capacities; as lone women and widows, but also as potential marriage partners, as contributors to dowries, as testators and as property owners. In extension to state law, they had a part to play in the ecclesiastical legal system, which offered them protection, sometimes when none was available elsewhere, but also questioned their motives, and acted to prevent bigamy by ensuring that women claiming to be widows really were so. They had a part to play in the legal system, creating the need for legislation and acting within the courts, as victims, defendants and witnesses, and they clearly felt that their role in law was legitimate and useful. We can suggest that if widows had felt that they were not going to be believed or that they would have been significantly discriminated against they would not have resorted to law. The frequency with which widows and other women made wills suggests that they felt that their wishes in legal documents were just as likely to be carried out as were those of any man. The numbers reclaiming dowries suggests that women had seen the reclamation process work for others and were prepared to try it.

This research has attempted to combine a contemplation of the realities of the legal situation for widows, with a discussion about the implications of the laws and their workings. This chapter has shown that, while some widows were able to claim the protection and assistance offered them by law, not all were in a position to manipulate all their legal rights to the full. It has also given some indication of who benefited from the work of the legislators, and who lost out, adding to previous conclusions about the ambiguous position of widows. It is not possible to say that rich widows stayed rich and prospered while poor widows always suffered, in the same

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<sup>72</sup> Carlton notes that “equity was giving increasing protection to their [the widow’s] rights”. C. Carlton, ‘The Widow’s Tale’, p. 126.



way that it is not possible to say that all laws were designed by men to manipulate women as economic pawns. The main theme which comes out of this study is the interrelation between the protection of widows, with protection of others from the actions of widows. The way widows in Venice reacted to the legal situation they found on the death of their husbands shows that for some the transition from married to widowed was an astoundingly simple process, and one which some women repeated several times over, while for others the difficulties they faced in trying to establish any kind of independence and financial stability after the death of their husbands could blight them for the remainder of their lives.

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<sup>73</sup> G. Calvi, 'Maddalena Nerli and Cosimo Tornabuoni', p. 334.



## The Financial Position of the Venetian Widow – Chapter 4

An examination of the material and financial position of the Venetian widow is central to this thesis not least because money was the first practical concern many women faced on widowhood. Although much about the potential for financial control, the entitlement of the widow and her ability to dispose of property has already been considered from a purely legal point of view, this chapter will develop these themes further and can be divided into three topics for discussion. Firstly it will consider how the widow acquired the financial capability to live, be that through dowry reclamation, inheritance from husband or other family, income from livelli, houses, or industry, or from charity. The second theme relates to the way in which that money was used within the widow's lifetime, through investment in government bonds or business, lending, assistance for offspring, for example providing daughters with dowries, or patronage of the arts and charitable works, although of course many widows had only enough money to maintain their own person. Finally this chapter will establish the way in which a widow's property was intended to be used after her lifetime, as seen through wills. Wills indicate what the importance of property was to widows, as purely a means of maintaining themselves and their family position, as part of a larger scheme of inheritance and as a means of ingratiating themselves before entry into the next world.

This chapter will concentrate its attention on high status women in particular, those women who left wills and tax records, and were included in the dowry reclamation cases of the *Giudici del Proprio*. While there are sources available for the study of the working widow and the poor widow, it would not have been possible to do them justice and thus they were not included with this research. Even high status women could face poverty, however, so this chapter does consider the importance of charitable assistance to the financial capabilities of Venetian widows.

Venetian devotion to economic activity was part of the myth of Venice, now largely dissected by the work of many historians.<sup>1</sup> Venice remained a great trading state into the sixteenth century, but, by the middle of the 1500s, the turn towards the purchase of land was well under way. Changes in manufacturing and trading practices affected the trading life of the city, and also affected the financial capabilities of its widows. The increasing desire of merchant families to conserve wealth led to the restriction of marriages among the upper classes and this

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on the myth of Venice see J. Grubb, 'When myths lose power'.  
M. Gilmore, 'Myth and Reality'  
D. E. Queller, *The Venetian Patriciate*.



meant that, while fewer girls married, those who did marry benefited from the concurrent dowry inflation and could become very wealthy women on widowhood. This increased financial potential for widows meant that families, both natal and marital, had greater reason to remain close to the widow, which put pressure on her, but also meant a continuance of family interest and support for wealthier women. Additionally, changes in manufacturing which, by the late sixteenth century saw increasing amounts of outwork done on the mainland, reduced the opportunities for widows wanting work in Venice. All these factors have a bearing on the evidence found in primary sources about widows' financial situation.

How much property a widow required to survive widowhood depended very much on her family circumstances. A widow with children doubtless needed greater financial backing than a lone widow, but at the same time, she had greater rights to remain in the marital home, and to support from her husband's estate. A widow with a large dowry needed no more than to claim that dowry and use it wisely, particularly if it included property which could provide income through rent. The widow of an artisan on the other hand, although potentially inheriting her husband's business, was not necessarily in a position to run it, and certainly not alone, thus requiring support. Widows of wage labourers frequently needed to find employment sufficient to pay their entire living costs or face reliance on family or charity. Even in the working classes dowries were often given on marriage but were more likely to be used up within that marriage, and thus not available for reclamation. In addition to living costs, some widows even needed to purchase clothing and linen, as that purchased by the husband for his wife during marriage was not her property unless left to her specifically, and remained under the ownership of the husband's estate. Destitution was a possibility for all women unable to reclaim their rightful property, or for women whose rightful property once reclaimed still amounted to very little in material terms.

By law the only property a Venetian widow was entitled to, aside from residency and subsistence rights granted to those widows caring for minor children, was the return of her dowry, minus the 'third', or *Corredum*.<sup>2</sup> This could mean anything from a token amount of clothing and cash to a large proportion of the husband's estate. Some marriage contracts stated that dotal property should be returned in the same form in which it was given, guaranteeing the widow at least what her family had intended for her. As payment of dowries was made first from movable property, then permanent property outside the city before property within the city, the aim being to keep the best property outside female hands, widows were sometimes left without a

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 3 for more details on the nature of the dowry and the process of reclamation.



home in Venice. Precise definition of the property included within the dowry could prevent that. Additionally, if any part of the dowry was sold, then property of the same value had to be registered with the *Procuratori di San Marco*, assuring that the total value of the dowry was not diminished. Cowan concludes that marriage portions did not often touch the main patrimony anyway, suggesting that women were given the least valuable land and property in dowries, or at least that which was of least importance to the family property as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Despite these facts, however, evidence from marriage contracts, dowry reclamation, tax records and wills shows that widows did own substantial portions of property within the city and that this came to them frequently through dotal possessions.

Chojnacki notes that disregard for the sumptuary laws surrounding the dowry could affect the widow's financial position, explaining that in law if the limit of the *Corredum* or 'third' was broken then not only did the husband benefit, but the widow could too, as she was entitled then to half of the husband's possessions.<sup>4</sup> Even when the total dowry limit was exceeded the widow could claim the actual amount given, rather than the legally registered one, as long as there was substantial evidence of the actual size, meaning that broken sumptuary laws did not necessarily disadvantage women.

It is clear that repossession of the dowry could be a source of endless litigation, and contention over particular pieces of property could take a very long time. Chapter 3 has shown that 77 out of 100 dowry cases sampled appear to have been at least partially resolved, and that of these 66 were resolved within one year. What also needs to be considered is the nature of the dowries claimed by the upper classes of Venetian society through the courts, how they were divided into property within and outside the city, and the amount actually reclaimed in comparison to the amount requested.

It is interesting to establish first the types and amounts of requests most commonly made by widows in dowry reclamation cases and to examine whether the size of the reclamation affected the frequency with which the property was specified. Out of 100 examples, four cases requested property with no value stated, and so these have not been included, but of the other 96 cases it was possible to examine how frequently specific property, for example areas of agricultural land or houses, and unspecified property, for example 'furniture' or 'movables', were mentioned.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A. F. Cowan, *The Urban Patriciate*, p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> S. Chojnacki, 'Marriage Legislation', pp. 163-178.



Total amount reclaimed (in ducats)	Number of claims where specific property was mentioned	Number of claims where non-specific property was mentioned	Number of claims where no property was mentioned	Total
0-200	3	1	4	8
201-500	13	7	9	29
501-1000	8	3	12	23
1001-2500	12	2	0	14
2501-5000	7	0	4	11
5001-20000	8	0	3	11
Total				96

**Table 4.1** Showing, in relation to the size of the amount of dowry reclaimed, the likelihood that the property within the reclamation request would be specified, either exactly or just by type of property.

What these figures show is that, whatever the size of the dowry being requested, the property to be returned could be specified. While it was most likely when the size of the dowry was over 1000 ducats, as would perhaps be expected, it was still common when the amounts were smaller. What is strange is that even where the figure requested exceeded 5,000 ducats, the property in which it was to be paid was not always specified. Maybe this was because it was not felt to be necessary, as the family were well aware of how it was to be paid and could not repay in any other form anyway, but perhaps also because where the dowries were so large, the wealth of the family was such that its repayment was less significant. The former seems more likely. What is particularly interesting is that it was only in the amounts ranging from 1,000 -2,500 ducats that the repayment was requested just in specified property. This suggests that it was these dowries, of about average size, that were most at risk of being returned only in part or not at all.

The other aspect to these figures is that they show the range of dowries requested for reclamation. There were several examples of dowries where the total requested was 150 ducats, suggesting that this was the minimum size which could be claimed through the Giudici del

<sup>5</sup> Reclamation requests taken from ASV, Giudici del Proprio, Vadimoni, B. 149 and 156.



Proprio.<sup>6</sup> Smaller dowries were more likely to have been used within the marriage anyway, and would have been less frequently available for reclamation. The spread in the size of dowries requested was very wide but the greatest number came in the band 201-500 ducats, and only 11 exceeded the 5000 mark. This suggests that, not only were the legislators' fears about dowry inflation as a means of inheritance through the female line relatively unfounded, but also that, although dowries certainly could get very large, it was rare for widows to reclaim extortionate amounts. Two exceptionally large dowries were found within the examples. Contarina Contarini, widow of Marco Dolfín requested 20,000 ducats, which in fact was not paid in its entirety.<sup>7</sup> Felicita Marchesi, widow of Paolo Sarotti, a cittadino, requested 10,000 ducats, which was specified as including 9,000 from her mother's dowry containing pearls, cash and other property and when the payment was found, the amount granted in fact far exceeded the request, with one property containing 92 *campi* and buildings valued at 15,260 ducats on its own.<sup>8</sup> The average amount requested was 2018 ducats, a respectable amount for most noble daughters, but the spread of requests gives a more accurate picture of the real nature of requests by widows for the return of their dowries in Venice.<sup>9</sup>

While the amount and nature of requested property is of interest to the historian, however, a more important factor for the widow in practice was the amount and nature of the property actually returned.<sup>10</sup> Three quarters of cases saw a return of property in some form, but how many actually got what they requested, or at least a similar amount is a different question. If the average amount requested is not an accurate reflection of the reality of reclamation requests, then equally neither the number getting some kind of payment, nor the average of those payments, accurately reflects the actual payment system.

That 77% of those making requests got some payment suggests that the system worked well for widows in general, as some of those whose cases were not followed up may have died themselves, decided to drop the reclamation proceeding or still actually had some payment either informally or much later, and thus outside the scope of this research. However, the average

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<sup>6</sup> For example the case of Giovanna Da Verona, widow of Marco Maffei, who requested 150 ducats and in fact received 170 in payment.

ASV, Giudici del Proprio, Vadimoni, Reg. 149, p. 68. Mobili, Reg. 174, pp. 48t-49t.

<sup>7</sup> ASV, Giudici del Proprio, Vadimoni, Reg. 149, pp. 27t-28. Foris, Reg. 40, pp. 169t-170.

<sup>8</sup> ASV, Giudici del Proprio, Vadimoni, Reg. 149, pp. 44t-46. Mobili, Reg. 174, pp. 14-16t. Minutarum, Reg. 21, pp. 46t-48.

<sup>9</sup> 100 cases were taken from ASV, Giudici del Proprio, Vadimoni Reg. 149 and 156. Of these 100, 96 contained the exact value of the request. The total amount requested was 193,720 ducats, which, divided between these 96 equals 2018 ducats each.

<sup>10</sup> Details of all the sources used in the examination of the reclamation procedure can be found in Chapter 2, footnote 9.



amount returned, when divided between all those 96 with valued requests equals only 828 ducats each, much less than half of the average amount requested. Even when the total returns of 79,531.5 ducats were divided only between those 77 with located payments, the average payment was still only 1033 ducats. This suggests that widows were in fact getting a very bad deal on repayments.

Portion of amount requested which was returned	Number of Cases
None of amount requested	24
Less than half amount requested	20
Between half and 3/4 amount requested	8
More than 3/4 amount requested	19
Exact amount requested	9
More than amount requested	15
Unknown amount	1
Total	96

**Table 4.2.** Showing what proportion of the requested dowry amount widows actually received in payment.

A better way of determining the nature of the dowry repayment system is to establish how frequently widows got back at least half of what they requested. Table 4.2 shows that 45 out of 96 widows got less than half of what they requested, or in fact nothing at all, but it is important to recognise that although payment may not have appeared in official records in the five years following the request, the records therefore considered for this study, it may still have eventually been made. Those with small payments may have had additional claims settled privately or at a much later date too. These figures therefore signify a worst-case scenario for dowry reclamation, yet still indicate a more positive picture than would be gained from the averages alone. That 24 women received payment of a sum equalling or exceeding the amount they requested shows that for some women the system could in fact work very well.

Establishing more clearly the nature of the returned property can also offer insight into the financial position of many widows. It is clear from the *Vadimoni* examined that many widows did request the return of specific pieces of property and the first thing to be noted here is that only very rarely, in fact in only two cases, was the same property mentioned on both request and payment. On several occasions this was because payment was not made at all, but otherwise can



be attributed to both the neglect of the notary to name property in payment statements, and also the failure of marital family to return that specific property. A more in depth study into this aspect of dowry return is most definitely required as the results here suggest that the dowry system was failing all widows who wanted specific property to be returned.

The legal processes for dowry reclamation stated that payment was to be made first from the '*Mobili*' in the husband's estate, and then from the '*Stabili di Fuori*' and only thereafter from the '*Stabili della Città*'. That this was the case is evident from the division of property payments between the three sections of the *Giudici del Proprio*, the *Mobili*, *Foris* and *Minutarum*. 44,663.5 ducats worth of dotal property was returned to widows in the form of *Mobili*. 16,488 was returned in *Stabili di Fuori* as found in the *Foris* records and 18,380 in *Stabili della Città* through the *Minutarum*. Widows were being given the least valuable property as far as family strategies were concerned, but it must be remembered that furniture and household goods may have been more significant for women having to set up on their own, than was farming land in the Veneto, or even a workshop in Venice. *Mobili* was the most heavily used means of payment, while *Foris* and *Minutarum* were more equally divided. While the figure for *Foris* should have perhaps been higher as the second in the list of sources for payment, it must be recognised that many families would not have owned property outside Venice to use as payment and thus would have instead made payment through the *Minutarum*. What these figures show is not necessarily that widows were fobbed off with low quality property, but that the system of reclamation was working as the law dictated. Many women may have been content with payment in *Mobili* anyway, especially as payment was so heavily requested in that form.

One aspect of the dowry system, which has been looked at for Venice in detail only by Bellavitis, is the existence of *Contradotte* within Venetian marriage settlements.<sup>11</sup> A survey of dowry reclamation cases indicates that the *Contradotta* was actually quite commonly used by nobles and non-nobles, although this is not evident from a similar study of the marriage contracts themselves. In 100 examples where requests were made, 43 included a *Contradotta* as part of that request. It could make up anything from 5% to 95 % of the total dowry reclaimed, but on average constituted about one third of the total amount the widow requested. Of the 23 not found to be concluded within the payment sections of the *Giudici* records, one requested a *Contradotta* sum larger than the original dowry, one equal to it, and 11 requested *Contradotte* smaller than the main dowry. Of the 77 where repayment in full or in part was found to have occurred, 5

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<sup>11</sup> Bellavitis cites the example of Venetian noblewoman Pisana Pisani, who married a Trevisan noble in 1547 with a dowry of 1,000 ducats, and received a 3,000 ducat *Contradotta*.



requested a *Contradotta* of more than the dowry itself, one a sum equal, and 24 a sum smaller. The smallest *Contradotta* found was that of Lucia Milioto, widow of Giuseppe Laborini, whose 437 ducat dowry had an additional 20 ducat *Contradotta*. Interestingly she was granted exactly 457 ducats in payment. Vittoria Zilio, widow of merchant Giorgio Rotta had the largest *Contradotta*, at 8,000 ducats, compared with a dowry of 800. Apolonia Stella's *Contradotta* was even more significant as a percentage of the total request, although it was only 300 ducats, because her own dowry totalled just 22 ducats.<sup>12</sup>

The *Contradotta* was certainly more than a token amount, and could exceed the amount given in dowry many times, but, at the same time, it should not be regarded as a payment to the natal family by the husband, as it is clear that it was not divided from the husband's estate until after his death and the reclamation of the rest of the dowry. The *Contradotta* was more for the benefit of the widow and only her family should she return to reside with them. This meant that the dowry was not necessarily any less of a blow to family patrimony, but meant perhaps that fathers and mothers could provide a smaller dowry without the fear that their daughter would be unprovided for on widowhood.

That *Contradotte* were sometimes attached to the largest level of dowries modifies Cowan's earlier assumption that only small dowries would have a *Contradotta*, although if we look at the sample we can see that more frequently they did accompany smaller dowries.<sup>13</sup> The average dowry request where there was a *Contradotta* attached was 1224 ducats, quite a step down from the 2018 average for dowries in general. This implies that a *Contradotta* was more often negotiated when the brides' family were unable to provide a dowry of sufficient size on their own. Further study into the frequency and significance of *Contradotte* is now required and could lead to conclusions not only about the *Contradotta* itself but also its affect on the reclamation process and inheritance.

Inheritance was a crucial form of income for the Venetian widow. Women, both married and widowed, inherited from people other than their husbands, but it was bequests from husbands that were usually the most substantial and significant. Executorship and guardianship granted to widows by their husbands has already been considered in Chapter 3, but what needs to be examined here is the kinds of property which widows were left. Although theirs by law

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A. Bellavitis, 'La Famiglia "Cittadina"', p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> ASV, Giudici del Proprio, Vadimoni, Reg. 149, pp. 40t-41t.

ASV, Giudici del Proprio, Vadimoni, Reg. 149, pp. 84-85.

ASV, Giudici del Proprio, Vadimoni, Reg. 156, pp. 42t-43.



anyway, husbands frequently left wives their dowries, but the dowry was often only part of the property left.

Amount Granted to Wife in Husband's Will	Number who received that amount
Dowry minus Corredum	1
Dowry plus Corredum	1
Dowry plus extra living costs	4
Dowry plus Residuo	5
Residuo	3
Other amount (neither dowry nor Residuo)	1
Total	15

**Table 4.3** Showing the provision made for wives in the wills of Venetian men.<sup>14</sup>

From a small sample of just 15 husband's wills, a few conclusions can still be drawn about the nature of giving between spouses. It is clear that, in the majority of cases, wives were granted more than simply what the law allowed them. There are difficulties trying to calculate the exact amounts given to these women, because the size of the dowry is not always stated, and the size of the *Residuo* is also unknown. The nature of additional bequests, for example living costs, or shelter, show that care for wives on widowhood was certainly a priority. The will of Pietro Gonella offers a good example of this.<sup>15</sup> He granted his wife clothing for the rest of her life, recognising that it could be hard for widows to obtain these sorts of goods. Although the amounts men left their widows were not necessarily enough to live on, they are an indication that affection, as Chojnacki has very clearly demonstrated, was central to spousal bequests and thus widowhood finance.<sup>16</sup>

This element of care for the widow's life demonstrates another aspect to widowhood finance. While widows were given shelter, living costs and sometimes a lot more, frequently these gifts were for their lifetimes only, or they had conditions attached. Alessandra Strozzi's husband, for example, said that she could reclaim her dowry, but could have use of the farm for her lifetime if she did not.<sup>17</sup> Husbands wanted to support their widows and to give them some

<sup>13</sup> A. E. Cowan, *The Urban Patriciate*, p. 132, footnote 437.  
<sup>14</sup> See footnotes of Chapter 2, footnote 16 for a complete list of the husband's wills used.  
<sup>15</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile, Testamenti, Atti Marsilio, B. 1213, no. 932, 1551.  
<sup>16</sup> S. Chojnacki, 'The Power of Love', pp. 126-148.  
<sup>17</sup> A. Morten Crabb, 'How Typical Was Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi', p. 50.



responsibility to control property, but that property ultimately belonged to the lineage. French legislators most carefully controlled the use of the widow's inherited wealth, with a series of laws in the sixteenth century.<sup>18</sup> From 1510 widowed parents could not make bequests to a new spouse at the expense of her heirs, from 1560 the law placed these restrictions just on women, and in 1567 regulations were tightened further, meaning that widows could no longer inherit from their children. Fear, rather than proof that this was common behaviour was probably the reason behind this legislation; nevertheless it ably demonstrates how concern for lineage inheritance could lead to restrictions on the financial capability of the widow.

A number of examples of restrictions placed upon widows have been found among the wills of Venetian men; for example, Antonio Padoan allowed his wife the *Residuo* of his estate for life and other property on the condition that she care for their children, attempting to ensure lineage continuity.<sup>19</sup> The granting of only a life interest was relatively common. Giovanni Alberto dal Basso's wife was left shelter for life, while the wife of Andrea Donado was left the *Residuo* of his estate until her death.<sup>20</sup> The *Residuo* was often left with a long list of heirs attached, even if it was not going first to the wife, but particularly where the wife was the first in line, to prevent her from alienating the property to another line via her own testament.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes even dowries came with conditions, that they be passed on to the children of a marriage. This indicates that the transfer of dotal property to the woman was only temporary.<sup>22</sup> It was not necessarily a derogatory comment on the widow's abilities to be left a lifetime interest, the property often still needed careful management, but was a sign that succession through the female line was not considered to be a real possibility. It must be remembered though that at this time, this type of restriction, particularly in the form of partial entail, was commonly placed upon many beneficiaries, not just women. Conditions about property control cannot be regarded as a purely patrilineal measure.

Controlling how a widow could use her wealth did not just necessarily mean restricting how she disposed of it in her will either. Sumptuary laws aimed to stop wealthy wives and widows from spending vast quantities on personal effects, to encourage modesty, but also to maintain the patrimony. Buying jewellery, with its intrinsic value, was a more acceptable way of

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<sup>18</sup> B. Diefendorf, 'Widowhood and Remarriage', pp. 379-395.

<sup>19</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Cavanis, Marc'Antonio, B. 193, no. 34, 1564.

<sup>20</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Secco, B. 1191, no 295, 1585.

ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Canal, Girolamo, B. 189, no. 6, 1530.

<sup>21</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile, Testamenti, Atti Marsilio, B. 1213, no. 932, 1551.

<sup>22</sup> Cristophoro Zen's wife was left the *Residuo* of his property because he recognised that she was obliged to leave her entire dowry to the children.



spending money than on clothing, which was regarded as a statement of independence and one with no resale value. Spending on clothing by widows can partly be attributed to necessity, if their husbands had not left them clothing but, in some cases, clothing could be more of a statement than a means of bodily covering.

Businesses inherited by women were often restricted in their activities too.<sup>23</sup> Family restrictions could be influential and the inheritance of working businesses by widows could provoke the most active opposition. In some places in Italy businesses were taken back by husband's kin, as was land, although no evidence of this in Venice has been found.<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere widows were encouraged to give up the public face of business activity as a means of placating family. In Paris, widows could remain in the guilds on the inheritance of a business, but were forced to leave if they remarried.<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere, guild membership was restricted for widows, who were not allowed to take on apprentices, and thus keep businesses running, or were restricted in what they could produce. Luxury trades, except silk production and lace-making, became increasingly male-dominated, and in other trades women were involved at a low skill level, offering employers some justification for the low wages women were paid.

Evidence for Venice suggests that growth in the sixteenth century was beneficial to women in industry. They lost out in the seventeenth century as work moved to the countryside, but some women had no choice but to continue in business or face destitution. Luca Molà has surveyed the activities of widows in the silk industry and concluded that in certain parts of the industry and in the production of particular types of cloth, widows were prolific but in other areas they were less able to work.<sup>26</sup> Widow's work in other areas of manufacture has been less comprehensively researched however, and the sources used for this thesis offer only limited information. Without a more wide-ranging statistical survey we cannot know the real contribution such occupations made to widowhood finance in early modern Venice.

Inheritance of a business by a widow was relatively rare in Venice and did not necessarily mean that she would continue in that trade, but it did at least suggest that she had learnt some basic business skills which could be transferred. Single women were rarely employed as artisans in Venice and were more likely to work on a lower level, selling food or doing laundry. Poor women had always had a role as joint breadwinners so the need to work

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ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Moro, B. 1202, no. 30, 1606.

<sup>23</sup> See Chapter 3, section on guild regulations and ability of widows to run businesses.

<sup>24</sup> O. Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her*, p. 245.

<sup>25</sup> B. Diefendorf, 'Widowhood and Remarriage', p. 388.

<sup>26</sup> L. Molà, Paper given to the University of Warwick in Venice Graduate Seminar, October 1997. See also his thesis, L. Molà, *The Silk Industry*.



would not have been new to many on widowhood: nevertheless, the miserable rates paid to women in comparison to men meant that to earn a decent living was far harder for a woman as a widow than as half of a couple. Women's work was also more unstable than men's, and, although laws attempted to protect female workers, for example from attack by their employers, competition for jobs meant that women had to put up with bad conditions. Poor women also may have been required to pay off the debts of their husbands, and this could be a primary concern. Hufton notes that women often moved to cheaper residences on widowhood, unable to maintain the standards of living that they had enjoyed in married life.<sup>27</sup> Domestic service was the only occupation which offered any kind of 'retirement' and very few widows worked in the domestic sector.<sup>28</sup> Most had to provide for their own old age. For those on only a bread-line wage, saving for the future was impossible and this meant dependence on charity once wage earning ended.

Venetian widows were seen as a legitimate destination for charity and the *Scuole* were sometimes the first source to whom a widow could appeal, particularly if her husband had been a member, as in the case noted by Chambers and Pullan of Filomena Stella.<sup>29</sup> Her husband Paulo D'Anna had been *Guardian Grande* of the *Scuola Grande di San Rocco*, yet she was in desperate need and was granted the rent of a house owned by the *Scuola* for 15 ducats or less. *Scuole Grandi* only dealt with the most respectable poor though, and smaller guilds, although not as wealthy, could be just as active in the provision of charity to widows. Parish and public charity was also important, with widows noted as officially within the group needing assistance from the Venetian poor law from the early sixteenth century. However, Pullan notes that, while widows, and other women with dependent children were regarded as a serious problem, there was only vague government advice about what should be done.<sup>30</sup> Priests and deputies were instructed to offer them any work they could do and to supplement their income from charitable funds. There was no common fund for the poor.

One option for a few poor and elderly widows was entry into a hospital or charitable institution. Chapter 5 describes in detail some of the institutions set up in the early modern period to house old and infirm widows, and, while they housed relatively few women in total, at least some of the pressure on other sources of assistance was relieved. Private charity such as this was becoming increasingly important in the sixteenth century, and widows were sometimes recognised as worthy recipients as well as important testators. As such they became a significant

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<sup>27</sup> O. Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her*, p. 240.

<sup>28</sup> M. Chojnacka, 'Single Women', p. 8-10.

<sup>29</sup> D. Chambers and B. Pullan, *Venice*, pp. 319-320.

<sup>30</sup> B. Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, p. 253.



part of the institutional life of the city and have remained so in the intervening years, with some widows still housed in the institutions set up in the Renaissance.<sup>31</sup>

Not all widows required such assistance though, and a relatively large number of widows played the role of landlord rather than poverty-stricken, charity-reliant tenant. Elsewhere in Europe, renting and lending were particularly common female occupations and this was true for Venice too. Lending in many places was technically illegal; in fact in Venice, the Jewish population were the only group licensed to lend money for profit, and this only because in the long term it benefited the Venetian government. The way in which many widows lent in Venice was through the *livello* system.<sup>32</sup> Its popularity as a means of earning an income is evident from the fact that several wills mention *livelli*, and that of the 38 widows whose tax declarations were read, 12 had *livelli* providing part of their income.<sup>33</sup> It has been suggested that widows often lent money to kin, but, if this was the case, the relationship was not frequently noted. A couple of examples of loans to family were found in wills, firstly in that of Vienna Badoer, who, as a bequest, excused her two nephews and niece the money she had loaned them, which amounted to more than 20 ducats each.<sup>34</sup> Laura Gregolin left to her son as a part of his inheritance 200 ducats which she had lent to her cousin Isabella. In a later Codicil to the first will she stopped to consider the consequences of this bequest and realised that this might cause great distress to her cousin. She decided to make provision for repayment only if it did not impoverish her cousin, otherwise, her son would have to wait until the death of Isabella.<sup>35</sup>

*Livelli* rarely provided an income alone or even the major source of income, and renting houses or rooms to other widows, as well as men and families, for some women provided a large proportion of their declared earnings. Five wills mention homes which the widow owned and rented out and the *Decime* figures were as high as 31 out of the 38. Widows were almost equally likely to rent out land, measured in *Campi*, as they were houses. 23 tax declarations noted the rent of a number of *Campi* as a source of income and occasionally it was the only form, although

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<sup>31</sup> See F. Semi, *Gli "Ospizi"*, for details of which institutions within Venice are still used for their original purpose. Some, for example the Crociferia, are even still in the original location, although the facilities have naturally been updated.

<sup>32</sup> Pullan usefully describes the process of lending by *Livello*.

A, wishing to borrow 5,000 ducats from B, would fictitiously sell land to B for 5,000 ducats and B would fictitiously lease the land back to A for rent (the interest on the loan, usually 6%).

B. Pullan, 'The Occupations and Investments', p. 388.

<sup>33</sup> The tax records used to compile these figures are listed in Chapter 2, footnote 18, and the wills used are listed in Chapter 2, footnote 15. While a total of 40 tax records were read, only 38 were used in the compilation of these figures because two contained no mention of any property, only pleas to be excused taxes.

<sup>34</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Brinis, B. 158, no 920, 1594.



more frequently, like *livelli*, it was combined with the rent of houses. Both renting and loaning involved relatively little activity outside the home for the widow, unlike trading for example, and allowed widows to make use of their inheritance without exciting too much attention. They did not necessarily even have to act in person, and if a representative was elected, this was a way to provide an income which could not easily be condemned.

What widows could do with the money they came by was not restricted to the purchase of property and lending. Morten Crabb notes that Alessandra Strozzi invested in relatives' companies, and in sharecropping, and also provided her sons with capital for their own business ventures.<sup>36</sup> Some widows handed over their estates before death, using their wealth to assist the family patrimony without having to actually manage it themselves. Chambers and Pullan show that, in Venice, some widows invested in the *Monte Nuovo* of 1509, perhaps to provide for themselves later in old age, although Pullan suggests that *livelli* were the most popular investment, because the land involved in *livelli* offered added security.<sup>37</sup> This is despite the fact that *livelli* returned only 6% instead of the 7.5% interest on government stock. Banks were not trusted by many and the physical existence of land made investment in it appear more secure, although those who had invested in some of Venice's overseas possessions, such as Cyprus, came to realise that land was not always so sound an investment after the possession was lost.

Hardwick considers the possibility that widows, who had not been involved in household management before widowhood, could actually mismanage the property they inherited and damage their own financial position simply through lack of experience.<sup>38</sup> Evidence from Venice suggests that many widows did have experience of household management during marriage, with the domestic sphere considered to be a predominantly female domain, and this experience was crucial on widowhood. Widows were often those called upon to manage the finances of convents for example, so mismanagement as a cause for widowhood poverty may be regarded as only a rare occurrence.<sup>39</sup> Kalas details the financial activities of Jeanne de Gontault in her widowhood and shows how she was actively involved in rent collection, investment, and in the purchase of property.<sup>40</sup> Notarial records for Venice show that widows there were also involved in property sale and purchase, for example Franceschina Abauro who sold some land "for her own

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<sup>35</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Crivelli, B. 222, no. 1134, 1592.

<sup>36</sup> A. Morten Crabb, 'How Typical Was Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi', p. 52.

<sup>37</sup> D. Chambers and B. Pullan (eds.), *Venice*, p. 161.

B. Pullan, 'The Occupations and Investments', p. 389.

<sup>38</sup> J. Hardwick, 'Widowhood and Patriarchy', p. 135.

<sup>39</sup> V. J. Primhak, *Women in Religious Communities*, p. 118.

<sup>40</sup> R. J. Kalas, 'The Noblewidow's Place', pp. 531-534.



reasons”.<sup>41</sup> Widowhood control over property could sometimes be carried into a second marriage too with Bianca Trevisan, for example, demanding rights over a house in San Barnabà for her *dimissoria*, and Maria da Lezze also making provision for free use of a portion of her dotal property.<sup>42</sup>

	Total Number of Contracts	Number of Contracts Signed or Co-Signed by Woman.	% of Total Contracts Signed or Co-Signed by Woman
Single Women 1590s	30	4	13.33%
Single Women 1630s	30	7	23.33%
Widows 1590s	21	15	71.43%
Widows 1630s	37	26	70.27%

**Table 4.4.** Showing, from the total number of marriage contracts found for widows and a similar sample size taken for single women in the 1590s and 1630s, the numbers who signed the contracts themselves, either alone or alongside a representative.<sup>43</sup>

That widowhood was a time to take financial responsibility is also seen in the general involvement of widows in their own second marriage contracts, whatever the nature of the specific requirements within them. We can see that on widowhood considerably more women were involved in their own marriage contracts, partly because they were less likely to have parents to act for them, but also because they were older, more experienced in financial matters, and more able to act for themselves. They were taking financial control of their own lives, and wanted to ensure that they were represented fairly.<sup>44</sup>

The average amount of the settlements found in second marriage contracts also suggests something about widowhood finance. Second marriages did not have to stick to the dowry limits prescribed by law, but by the 1630s many were registering marriage contracts which stuck to the 6,000 limit anyway.<sup>45</sup> The 1590s contracts are a better indicator of the enormous amounts of

<sup>41</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile, Atti Beazian, Fabrizio and Lucillo, B. 586, no. 42, 1610.  
<sup>42</sup> ASV, Avogaria di Comun, Contratti di Nozze, B. 118/8, no. 1819, and B. 114/4, no. 641.  
<sup>43</sup> All contracts sampled for this table were taken from ASV, Avogaria di Comun, Contratti di Nozze, B. 113/3, 114/4, 117/7, 118/8.  
<sup>44</sup> For more details on the question of financial ability as a contributor to identity see Chapter 8.  
<sup>45</sup> One contract of the 37 sampled from the 1630s (from B. 117/7 and 118/8) was not used because it did not mention the value of the property. An average taken from 36 marriage contracts used, totalled 5804



property a widow could bring to a second marriage, with the average from the sample taken being 9,312 ducats each, and thus well over the designated limit of 6,000.<sup>46</sup> This is a sign that remarrying widows could be very wealthy, but also perhaps suggesting that only the very wealthy would bother to have the amount of their contract registered.

*Decima* evidence is important to this study because it registers precisely those widows who did own some property.<sup>47</sup> There were certainly a large number in the 1582 records, with a survey of the indexes showing that 755 widows submitted declarations. While the problems of the use of tax records, i.e. the fact that they may well have been falsified, are recognised, they would only have been falsified to reduce the widows' apparent activities, indicating that whatever was registered as income for these women was the minimum of what they were really getting. Although the occupations of widows are not indexed, those of husbands sometimes are, and they range from painter to doctor, tailor to fisherman. Women from a wide variety of backgrounds could be among those widows required to pay tax. Some of the declarations state poverty as a reason for exemption, but many other women list strings of property, inside and outside the city, and note the value of the incomes from them.

One interesting example is that of Loredana Loredan, widow of Antonio Badoer, who rented her own house in San Giacomo dall'Orto for 60 ducats a year, and yet owned a number of other houses which she rented out to others.<sup>48</sup> These included a small house, which Franceschina, also a widow, rented for 13 ducats a year, and some land in the Veneto, which paid her 8 *stai* (a Venetian measurement for grain) of wheat a year. Her total income came to over 200 ducats a year and allowed her to maintain the rent on her own home, which was particularly expensive because she had to house herself and her children.

Marietta Pisani's return indicates how she came to be in possession of a great collection of property, noting that some was bought by her sons and that one piece of land was inherited from a female relative.<sup>49</sup> She owned a large number of houses, and pieces of land, including some in

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ducats each. This average is of little use in reality, however, as 32 out of the 36 examples noted the total amount of their dowry as 6,000 ducats, and only one of the remaining 4 submitted a figure in the marriage contract exceeding 6,000. See ASV, Avogaria di Comun, Contratti di Nozze, B. 118/8, no. 1892, which totalled 8,211 ducats.

<sup>46</sup> 21 marriage contracts were used (from B. 113/3 and 114/4); however, as with the contract for the 1630s, one could not be used to calculate the average as it did not contain the value of the property. The smallest dowry noted was 1,000 ducats but 11 exceeded the dowry limit, and some by a great amount.

<sup>47</sup> ASV, Dieci Savi Sopra le Decime in Rialto.

See Chapter 5 for a discussion of what *Decima* evidence suggests about widows and their families.

<sup>48</sup> ASV, Dieci Savi Sopra le Decime in Rialto, B. 168, no. 448.

<sup>49</sup> ASV, Dieci Savi Sopra le Decime in Rialto, B. 168, no. 422.



Rovigo, on which tax had already been paid to the magistrate of Rovigo. but she also borrowed money herself, and lists a number of people to whom payments were made. Marietta's return is particularly interesting because of the number of mitigating circumstances she listed within it, presumably in the hope that her tax would be reduced. Not only are all her debts recorded, but also donations to religious institutions, and the number and ages of her dependents, who included three sons and three daughters (one married, two in convents), four grandsons, three granddaughters and two wet-nurses, all in her house and who all drew on her resources.

While *Decima* returns are not a comprehensive survey of widows' property ownership, they offer insight into the types of property held and the extent of widows' financial and legal know-how. The huge number of examples available makes them an excellent source for a wider study, and even this limited survey has produced thought-provoking examples.

The wills of widows are also crucial sources of financial information. Many Venetian women, especially those with more property, made wills to dispose of that property, both when they were wives and when they were widows. Widows and women without children were perhaps even more likely to need to make wills because they had no obvious heirs. Wills also allowed widows to reward or deprive members of their families. If a widow with children was intestate then her estate was divided equally between male and female offspring, but within wills widows frequently divided property less equally. Affection had perhaps a greater role in female giving than in male, principally because of a lesser obligation for women to bequest for the good of the lineage alone. Gifts to friends and family were often accompanied with terms of affection too, and even donations to the poor or to religious communities note compassion, or an important personal relationship with the institution concerned. Smith has noted that male wills rarely mentioned movable property. It was perhaps considered unimportant in the scheme of things, but women frequently leave token bequests of moveable objects, such as linen, clothing and furniture. This was both because this type of property was more frequently held by widows, and also because leaving smaller bequests allowed widows to indicate gratitude or affection towards a larger number of people and institutions.<sup>50</sup>

Religious bequests show that the Church played an important part in the life of many widows. This type of giving was partly formulaic, but it may also have been connected to the fact that the widow had already seen someone close to her die, and had spent more time considering death than other women. Men frequently specified funeral arrangements in their wills, and many widows also had a clear understanding of how funerals operated, being prepared to use their

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<sup>50</sup> A. A. Smith, 'Locating Power and Influence', p. 444.



finances to ensure that theirs were conducted in an appropriate fashion. 30 women, out of 51 considered, stated a preference of burial location, 12 requested burial alongside a family member and 21 noted that they wanted to be buried in a habit. While one widow advocated modesty in her burial arrangements, more often arrangements about food were left to the discretion of the executors. The religious aspect to burial was also considered carefully by widows, and more than three quarters requested masses either before or after the burial, or over a longer period. Further, 19 widows actually advocated who they wanted to accompany their body to the tomb, with many requesting orphans from the hospitals of the *Incurabili* and *Zanipolo*, and others, members of third orders or convents.

Burial requests were often accompanied by a bequest to the order in question. Donations by widows to convents and the Church could be of considerable importance to those institutions. That the Church recognised this is seen in the discouragement of remarriage. While moral and ethical reasons were always cited as the reasons the Church discouraged remarriage, it must be remembered that the Church's ulterior motive was to try and get donations from widows. These would be less forthcoming if there was a new husband, or increased chance of offspring inheriting. Baernstein has noted that, in Milan, convent and family were in competition for the widow's money, and that sometimes the convent won.<sup>51</sup> It was expected that most people would leave some small amount of property to the Church or to charity, but many widows left more, sometimes moving themselves and their fortunes into institutions. Baernstein raises the possibility that some widows, not taking full vows and thus not forced to give up all their property, were bullied into making the convent universal heir.<sup>52</sup> In Venice many of the wills of widows who entered convents are found in the Istituto di Ricovero e di Educazione (IRE), and were not part of the general survey of wills undertaken for this thesis. They are certainly deserving of future study, however, particularly because Semi's work has shown that, in the history of the *ospedali* of Venice, the wills of widows could be crucial.<sup>53</sup>

The IRE also houses the portraits of a number of widows who left property to religious houses in the early modern period. That these widows had portraits is a sign that they were wealthy women, and the decision to have a portrait painted or to patronise art in some other way was another indication of widowhood financial independence. The importance of widows to art

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<sup>51</sup> P. Renee Baernstein, 'In Widow's Habit', p. 787.

<sup>52</sup> P. Renee Baernstein, 'In Widow's Habit', p. 802.

<sup>53</sup> F. Semi, *Gli "Ospizi"*. For example the case of the widow Bonfemina Aletti who founded the Ospizio Aletti, pp. 161-162.



patronage is something which has been given great attention by Catherine King.<sup>54</sup> In her survey of Italian widowhood patronage she has shown that widows could commission art both within their lifetimes and posthumously, for commemoration of their own lives, the lives of husbands or other male relatives, and also as part of larger groups. She concludes that widows were able to commission differently from wives, and that, while women generally did not have large portraits or sculptures made of themselves, they were not averse to appearing in votive portraits, alongside holy figures, or in group works.<sup>55</sup> One particularly interesting case of female commissioning shows how donations to religious groups could also serve to enhance family standing and the position of the woman herself. Margarita Vitturi requested in her will of 1427 that money be invested for the construction of a chapel to encourage devotion to the annunciation, which was eventually built on the island of San Michele.<sup>56</sup> In another example, Filippa de Benedetti had a sculpted altarpiece made for Santi Giovanni e Paolo in Venice in 1485, influencing the structure of the church itself and also how both she and her brother were remembered. While widows were not the most prolific commissioners of art, their participation in this part of cultural life left an impression on religious buildings and on the development of the representation of women in art as a whole.

Bequests to servants were another way in which widows could influence the lives of others. They often demonstrated more than just obligatory payment of wages or gratuity, but real affection and kindness, between the mistress and the servant and even the servant's family. That giving to servants was regarded partly as a duty is evident in the fact that some wills note that 1 ducat be left to all the servants in the house at the time of death for example, but even when this occurred, other servants were often named specifically as well. Although it is becoming increasingly clear that women were not as confined to the domestic sphere as has been thought in the past, a great deal of a woman's time was nevertheless still spent in the home, and servants, particularly female ones, would have been an important source of daily contact. It is therefore natural that widows rewarded those who cared for them and with whom they were physically close by leaving them property and assisting them with dowries. Almost half the widows whose wills were looked at made a bequest of some kind to at least one member of the household. This ranged from single payments of a ducat each to every servant, to dowries for servants or their daughters, for example, the gift from Maria Bembo to Anzola, daughter of her servant Jacomo, of

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<sup>54</sup> C. E. King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*.

<sup>55</sup> C. E. King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*, pp. 2-7.

<sup>56</sup> C. E. King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*, pp. 91-93.



300 ducats for a dowry.<sup>57</sup> Most of these bequests were to female servants, (noted as *Massara*, *da Casa* or Nurse) but occasionally male servants were also rewarded for long service. What bequests to servants indicate is what has been suggested elsewhere, that widows left bequests, especially the smaller ones, to people they were close to, often women, as well as making their most significant bequests, in terms of property, still along lines of lineage interest.

That family was the primary recipient of widow's property is clear. Offspring received the *Residuo*, which must be assumed to generally be the largest portion of the widow's property, most frequently and also received a large proportion of all bequests.<sup>58</sup> Where there were sons, on only one occasion was a daughter granted the *Residuo*, but where there were no sons, daughters were bequeathed the *Residuo* of the widows' estate a further nine times. Even when daughters did not receive the *Residuo* they were often granted large sums or annuities. Daughters in convents were those most frequently given annual incomes in the wills of their widowed mothers. In fact on 8 occasions from a sample of 51 wills, one or more daughters were granted a living of between 4 and 30 ducats a year. These were granted sometimes from within the *Residuo*, and the condition attached that the brothers had to pay it if they were to retain that *Residuo*. This was the case in the will of Chiara Venier, who left her son a quarter of the *Residuo*, and 28 *Campi*, on the condition not only that he sent to Rome for indulgences, but that he give his sister Cecilia 50 ducats and his other sisters in convents 4 ducats each a year.<sup>59</sup> Married daughters could be similarly required to care for cloistered sisters, as in the case of Dandola Dandolo who inherited 1000 ducats from her mother's will on the condition that she give 2 ducats a year to her sister Maria, a nun.<sup>60</sup>

Widows also wanted to ensure that daughters without religious vocations were given the opportunity to marry or enter a convent, and lump sums were often granted. This type of bequest was not only given to daughters, but also to other female relatives, and from the 51 wills sampled, 8 included a dowry donation to one relative, 5 to two relatives and 2 widows left large sums to three separate female relatives. Daughters who had received their dowry already were often given token amounts of money or property in comparison to the larger legacies given to

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<sup>57</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Crivelli, B. 223, no. 1127, 1593.

<sup>58</sup> See Table 5.2 in Chapter 5. Full details of the wills used can be found in Chapter 2, footnote 15.

<sup>59</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Ziliol Giulio, B. 1242, no 137.

<sup>60</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Cigrigni, B. 208, no 158.



their undowered sisters.<sup>61</sup> Duty towards daughters and other members of the lineage is evident, and particularly towards the female members of the family. Once the duty to sons had been discharged through the bequeathing of the *Residuo*, the widow could feel justified in using her wealth to assist female relatives to gain a decent vocation, by offering the choice of marriage or convent with many bequests and helping to increase the dotal wealth of the next generation.

The significance of bequests by the widow is discussed more fully in Chapter 5, but what an examination of testaments shows here is that, while we cannot know exactly how much property widows had to leave, since the *Residuo* by its nature was undefined, we can identify a number of facts about widowhood testamentary giving. Where there were offspring, the majority of a widow's property usually went to them, although when these offspring became adults the bequests may have bypassed straight to grandchildren. Where there were male offspring, they tended to be bequeathed the *Residuo* of a widow's property, but were less likely to be granted individual lump sums or annuities. In fact it was not unusual for widows to make conditions requiring sons to care for daughters financially and physically. If a widow had only daughters, she was likely to grant them the *Residuo* of her property, again sometimes with a duty of care to younger sisters in convents. Daughters in general were more likely to be given annuities than any other relatives, but lump sums were granted to other female relatives and friends for the purpose of dowries. Where there were no offspring, the direction of widows' testamentary bequests was less obvious, although natal family were frequently favoured over marital family or non family.

The types of property left by widows are also indicative. Often money, of amounts from 1 ducat to thousands, was the main form of bequests left, with other property being included perhaps in the *Residuo*. Occasionally property was described more specifically and *livelli*, land and houses have already been noted. Household goods featured heavily in bequests both because this was often the main property widows held and also because this type of goods was of more value to them. Clothing and bed linen frequently came into this category, and food and wine sometimes appeared, particularly in annual payments to relatives in convents, or to servants.

Finally we can turn to literary sources for evidence about the financial position of the Venetian widow.<sup>62</sup> Prescriptive literature has the most to say, about the use of the patrimony in particular. Francesco Barbaro and Leon Battista Alberti offer advice to the wife on the

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<sup>61</sup> Faustina Bevilaqua noted that her daughter Helena was to be given only 10 ducats because she was not in need of anything else, and Angela Bon similarly excluded her daughter Maria from further inheritance because she had already received her dowry.

ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Bianco, B. 125, no. 332 and Atti Bianco, B. 124, no 33.



administration of the household, and Giulio Cesare Cabei specifically advises the widow, on how to employ servants, on their sound management, and on running the household economy.<sup>63</sup>

Ludovico Dolce makes specific reference to the widow's use of her inheritance during the period of mourning, concluding that the good widow should use money for alms rather than for a great tomb for her husband.<sup>64</sup> That a widow could manage finance effectively is accepted by all these writers, backed up by Carlo Goldoni, who notes that the widow in his play uses her wealth wisely when acting in a financial capacity as donor to her sister's dowry.<sup>65</sup> Moderata Fonte is the most active in encouraging financial activity for all women, recognising the huge potential in the amounts given to women for dowries and suggesting that women would be much better off if they just kept the money and did not marry. As widows they could sometimes achieve this reality of control over the dowry and this is one of the principal reasons why remarriage is discouraged by her.<sup>66</sup>

A diversity of potential financial positions faced the Venetian woman on widowhood. While intrinsically these were connected to the social and financial position of the widow's family and husband, there was also some potential for ruin, or success beyond family finance. Control of financial capability was crucial to independent action for widows, and inability to reclaim the dowry could mean that widows remained dependent, but even where dowries were left unclaimed, inheritance from husbands could still place women in positions of power. That many bequests were only for life denied the widow real financial independence but nevertheless, a life interest in an estate was doubtless better than an inherited debt, or the need to find immediate shelter and employment to survive, a situation which faced some widows.

A deeper study into the world of the working widow would perhaps produce a more negative picture for the prospects of the Venetian woman on widowhood, but evidence found thus far from wills and tax records suggests that a large number of women were capably

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<sup>62</sup> See Chapter 7 for more information on prescriptive literature and its advice to the widow.

<sup>63</sup> Alberti suggests that thrift, care for servants and control of the keys to household stores were the most important things a wife should remember.

L. B. Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, pp. 222-226.

Francesco Barbaro devotes a whole chapter to domestic matters, and again notes that well-behaved and instructed servants were crucial.

F. Barbaro, 'On Wifely Duties', pp. 215-220.

Cabei recommends that the widow behave like her father in administering the enjoyment of her riches and charity. If she is diligent and avoids scandal her household will run efficiently.

G. C. Cabei, *Ornamenti*, pp. 105-114.

<sup>64</sup> L. Dolce, *The Most Praiseworthy Instruction of the Honourable and Virtuous Life of the Widow* - as quoted in C. F. King - *Renaissance Women Patrons*, p.36.

<sup>65</sup> C. Goldoni, 'The Artful Widow', p. 144.

<sup>66</sup> M. Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, p. 113.



controlling and maintaining property to hand on through the lineage. The amounts of property could vary enormously; some widows lived on a pittance, others on an enormous inheritance. This fact only goes to show that, while poverty and widowhood can often be associated, to assume that all widows ended up in a worse financial position is misguided; although to regard widowhood as essentially a time of financial liberation is also perhaps mistaken.



## Widows and the Family – Chapter 5

Haraven has talked about the family as “a process over time”, a constantly developing structure, and widowhood, as a phase in a woman’s life. fits into this idea of an evolving family structure. Whatever the nature of the family or household unit, widows were frequently among those members passing through, as daughters, mothers, sisters and servants; as household heads and as dependents.<sup>1</sup> That widows were more than a marginal group within society is clear and their importance within the family will now be established.

Through the use of a number of sources, this chapter will consider what residency, guardianship, bequests, and evidence from contracts and legal sources show about the relationships between Venetian widows and their children, their natal families and their relatives by marriage. By addressing the questions of where widows lived, whether they raised their own children, who they left money to and who they turned to for help, we can see how far these women were able to act independently, but also to what degree they maintained contact with both sides of their families. Additionally the chapter will consider alternatives to the family, both institutions, religious and secular, and more informal local and female networks.

The Venetian family, many historians have concluded, was “the gateway to political life”, but to view it as this alone, a masculine institution, is to deny widows and other women the significant position within it they most surely held.<sup>2</sup> Family for the Venetians was a political unit, but also a financial, domestic and social one, and it was in these worlds that widows were fully functioning members, with central roles to play. Humanists from the fifteenth century were writing about the family and the role of women within it, and throughout the early modern period the female role was increasingly highlighted by the amount of money upper class women were bringing to marriage. *Fraternae*, businesses and households run by groups of brothers, emphasised ties between male relatives, but it has not been made clear whether this kind of household and family structure benefited the women born into that family, those married into it, or excluded women from positions of importance all together.

It has been suggested that Venetian men, particularly those of high status, sacrificed their own personal identities for the sake of the family, and that the family was the main outlet for expressions of identity in Venice.<sup>3</sup> We need to examine what roles widows played but also how

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<sup>1</sup> I. K. Haraven, ‘The Family as Process’, p. 322.

<sup>2</sup> M. L. King, ‘Caldiera and the Barbaros’, pp. 19.

<sup>3</sup> For further information about the question of patrician identities see J. S. Grubb, ‘Memory and Identity’, pp. 375-387.

D. E. Queller and J. E. Everett, ‘Family, Faction and Politics’, pp. 1-31.



important they were perceived to be by contemporaries, as guardians, household heads, effective administrators and advisors. Women, in marriage, were crucial as part of the perpetuation process of existing family structures, but it is hitherto unclear how far relations between the two families continued after the formal bond of marriage was broken by the death of the husband.<sup>4</sup> The principles of family life in the early modern period, from prescriptive writing, to law and religious treatises, say that men governed, and Kelly-Gadol has gone so far as to suggest that the early modern woman faced an “almost universal dependence upon her family and her husband” but what happened when the governing man was dead?<sup>5</sup> As well as looking at the widow as a connection to natal and marital families, we also need to consider her as potential head of her own family.

One of the first ways to establish the extent of widowhood authority is to investigate residence. Where a widow lived, who lived with her and whether she was recognised household head says a lot about her own authority within the family. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber’s study of the 1427 *Catasto* has been especially important in identifying this type of information for Florence. It has shown that 14.3% of households were headed by females, of which 6.3% were widows with children and only 0.1% widows alone.<sup>6</sup> In Venice, the *Status Animarum* household survey of the 1590s contains huge amounts of information purely about household structure and the *Decima* of 1582 adds detail about who widows shared their homes with and how these homes were held (sometimes detailing whom the house was rented from).<sup>7</sup>

From the *Status Animarum* it has been established that there were 4,715 widowed females in Venice in the 1590s, 2,886 of whom were heads of household, that is more than 60%, with only 2.3% noted as daughters of the head of household, and 2.8% as sisters. What this suggests is that if widows were not heading households of their own, they were also not returning to their parent’s houses, nor remaining in the home of the marital family. Most commonly widows turned to their children for support, if they were of an appropriate age, and 22.5% of widows were noted as parents of the household head.<sup>8</sup> Only a very small number, around 1% were found to be working as servants, which is surprising because elsewhere domestic service

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A. Cowan, ‘Love, Honour and the Avogaria di Comun’, pp. 5-19.

<sup>4</sup> A. Bellavitis, ‘La Famiglia “Cittadina”’, pp. 55-69.

<sup>5</sup> J. Kelly-Gadol, ‘Did Women have a Renaissance?’, pp. 136-164.

<sup>6</sup> D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*, pp. 292 and 305.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks must be offered here to Monica Chojnacka for her great assistance in the formation of these residency figures, taken from her survey of the 1590s *Status Animarum*, without which all conclusions would be more tentative. See M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*. Also M. Chojnacka, ‘Single Women’.

<sup>8</sup> M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*, p. 235, Table 5.8.



was an important source of employment for widows.<sup>9</sup> Further to this, Chojnacka has looked at the numbers of households headed by widows, and it is clear that the majority of these women lived alone (21%) or just with their children (50%). The remaining 29% headed households containing other relatives, most likely sisters or mothers, or unrelated people.<sup>10</sup>

A survey of a small number of cases from the *Decima*, where 30 out of the 40 considered noted residency, showed that again it was a large proportion of the widows, 50%, who were heading households.<sup>11</sup> Three lived with a son, and one with a daughter, although the fact that these women were making *Decima* declarations suggests that this too was as household head rather than as dependent mother. A further two widows noted they were living with relatives, and one with a second husband. Again this is an interesting case, as, if the widow had a second husband, why was she making the *Decima* declaration?<sup>12</sup> One widow noted her home as the Case della Scuola di San Rocco and the residency of the remaining seven is less clear, with several noting that they live in someone's house, but without clarifying whether it belonged to that person or whether the accommodation was actually shared.

In many cases ownership of the widow's home was unclear. Some widows' *Decima* declarations stated ownership of other property, making it quite likely that these women also owned their own homes, although even among Venetian men it was not uncommon for them to own properties to rent out and yet still live in rented accommodation themselves. Often the property owned by the widow was rented to other widows. Tesaura Mosto, for example, noted that she owned one property in which other widows occupied 6 of the 8 rooms, and Maria Gradenigo similarly rented out properties.<sup>13</sup> In fact, five examples were found of widows renting to widows and it is worthy of mention that the rents on many of these properties were lower than those on properties rented to men.<sup>14</sup> Some declarations also noted more specific ownership of their own home, for example Paulina di Priuli noted that the house she lived in was left to her for life by Zaccaria Mudazzo.<sup>15</sup>

It is not so surprising that, among the tax-paying group, widows owned and controlled property, but it is more surprising that among the general population so many widows headed households. It has often been suggested for Florence that widows had little option but to remain

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<sup>9</sup> M. Chojnacka, 'Single Women', p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*, p. 238, Table 5.10.

<sup>11</sup> ASV, Dieci Savi Sopra le Decime in Rialto, 1582, B. 168.

Details of the way in which the *Decima* was sampled can be found in Chapter 2.

<sup>12</sup> ASV, Dieci Savi Sopra le Decime in Rialto, 1582, B. 168, no. 617.

<sup>13</sup> ASV, Dieci Savi Sopra le Decime in Rialto, 1582, B. 168, nos. 431 and 527.

<sup>14</sup> The five examples are nos. 431 and 527 noted above and 559, 636 and 645.



within the marital family home or return to the natal family. Yet in Venice, while many of the widows heading households may well have been doing so in houses left to them by their husbands, only 16 were physically sharing domestic arrangements with in-laws. It is also clear that very few, only 104 in fact, returned home to their own parents for any length of time and that widows were far more likely to seek shelter with their own children than to turn to other relatives. Age was very much a determining factor on where the widow lived. If her children were under age she would more likely be household head, and 50% of widows heading households lived with their children alone. If the children were married themselves, then this was much less likely. 22.5% of the total number of widows lived with their children not as household head.

The problem with the use of residency figures when trying to evaluate relationships between widows and their families is that, while they can show what percentages were close enough to share houses, they can tell us nothing about the relations between widows and families with whom they did not reside. What these figures have offered to the discussion of widows and the family is evidence that many widows were not reliant on their families for shelter; unlike in Florence where Klapisch-Zuber suggests that it was not feasible for most to be independent.<sup>16</sup> Although a relatively large proportion of widows chose, or were forced to reside with their own offspring, the numbers returning to live with their own parents was very small, as were the numbers residing with siblings. Kuiper indicates that in the Netherlands in the eighteenth century it was in fact very old widows who were found living with sisters and daughters, and what seems to have been more common in Venice is that, rather than widows living in the homes of relatives, relatives were living with widows, with 29% of households headed by widows containing relatives, servants and others.<sup>17</sup>

Guardianship is a crucial question to the topic of family, and this chapter must establish how often it was the case that widows were granted guardianship. Much of the legal evidence on the issue has been offered in Chapter 3, but that now must be put into the context of family relations. Guardianship of children was most frequently settled by the husband's wishes as expressed in his last will and testament. A small sample of husbands' testaments has shown that, where there were children, guardianship was normally granted to their mother, although a larger survey is needed to provide conclusive evidence.<sup>18</sup> It is clear from residency evidence that large

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<sup>15</sup> ASV, Dieci Savi Sopra le Decime in Rialto, 1582, B. 168, no. 503.

<sup>16</sup> C. Klapisch-Zuber, "The Cruel Mother", p. 119-120.

<sup>17</sup> Y. Kuiper, 'Noble Widows', p. 163.

<sup>18</sup> See Chapter 2, footnote 16 for details of the wills used.



numbers of widows cared for their children, in fact half of those heading households. Many of those living alone many may not have had children anyway. We can also see that, of those widows not heading households, a large number lived with adult offspring so the question of guardianship was not relevant.

Elsewhere in Europe remarriage was one of the main reasons a widow would lose guardianship of her children although evidence of this in Venice is less readily available than might be expected. The examples found of husbands' wills, while in some cases offering widows the chance to relinquish guardianship of their children if they wished, did not specifically remove it on remarriage, and the only similar condition which was found removed only executorship, and not guardianship on the woman's remarriage.<sup>19</sup> Vettoria Desiderati, in fact, not only retained guardianship on remarriage but made it a condition of her second marriage contract that her new husband care for her son.<sup>20</sup> Baulant notes that in Paris the children, on remarriage of their mother, could be put under the guardianship of a 'family council' but that it was equally possible that the stepfather take on guardianship responsibilities.<sup>21</sup> This was rare in Venice, but clearly not unheard of.

Morten Crabb has observed that in Florence one in ten widows had control of minor children; however, if we use the *Status Animarum* figures we can see that in Venice it was almost one in three.<sup>22</sup> This difference may stem from the fact that there is a relatively large time gap between the two sets of figures, but also from different attitudes to marriage and widowhood. Where age gaps between husband and wife were larger, as in the Florentine marriage market, women were younger when widowed and perhaps regarded as less capable of caring for a family. This discrepancy may also be associated with views on the capability of women in general to cope with the running of a household and upbringing children. This point of comparison between Venice and Florence is one which deserves greater attention as guardianship is an issue central to the study of widowhood.

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<sup>19</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Canal, Girolamo, B. 189, no. 89. Will of Alvisè Badoer, whose wife Gratiamana was to be sole executor, unless she remarried.

<sup>20</sup> ASV, Avogaria di Comun, Contratti di Nozze B. 114'4, no. 643.

<sup>21</sup> M. Baulant, 'The Scattered Family', pp. 106-112.

<sup>22</sup> If the figures taken by M. Chojnacka from the *Status Animarum* are used to calculate these figures then we can see that, from a total number of widows noted as 4,715 and a total number of households headed by women described as widows, which contained only the widow and her children at 1,472, the actual percentage of widows living with children as guardian was 31.2%.

M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*, pp. 235-239.

A. Morten Crabb, 'How Typical was Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi', pp. 47-68.



Not all women either wanted guardianship or were in a position to cope with it. One such case was that of the mother of Ludovico Dolce.<sup>23</sup> His will, written in his own hand, became something of a life story, and he noted that his mother, now living with her son-in-law, had been left alone by his father's death when he was three. She was ill and had nothing in the world because of his father, who had consumed everything with his '*troppa bontà*'. Only because Ludovico was taken into the house of a kind merchant, and had been fortunate in business, was he in a position to leave property to his mother. It seems that his mother had two daughters by a previous husband, as well as another son, Ludovico's brother, but no mention was made of what happened to them, although clearly one of the girls had married. At one point Ludovico goes so far as to describe his mother as '*povera in extremis*' with nothing but the 'burdens' of children and debt. No doubt this was an extreme situation but it does indicate that guardianship was not always regarded as a blessing.

Chojnacki has already done some work on the relationships between widows and their children in connection to the election of boys to the *Balla D'Oro*, for early entry into the Great Council. He also looked at female contributions to dowries, and more evidence has now come to light through a study of marriage contracts and wills.<sup>24</sup> Guardianship of children was not enough in itself to ensure a good relationship between a widow and her children, and wills, indicating the bequests left to individual children, can help the examination of an otherwise unknowable side to the family life of Venetian widows. Chojnacki's work shows that, although fathers made up 56% of sponsors for men entering the lottery of the Venetian *Balla D'Oro*, of the other 46%, mothers made up nearly a third.<sup>25</sup> Widows also involved their own family as sponsors.

The involvement of widowed mothers in the legal aspects of their daughters' upbringing can be seen through their representation of daughters in marriage contracts.

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<sup>23</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Perazzo, B. 1222, no. 184. 1629 will of Ludovico Dolce. For other examples of guardianship as a burden rather than a privilege see ASV, Dieci Savi Sopra le Decime in Rialto, 1582, B. 168, no. 514. Anzelica Olivi noted that she was a poor widow with five children, in little position to pay tax, and so similarly did Maddalena di Battali, no. 441, who had six mouths to feed.

<sup>24</sup> S. Chojnacki, 'Kinship Ties', pp. 240-270.

S. Chojnacki, "'The Most Serious Duty'", pp. 133-154.

<sup>25</sup> S. Chojnacki, 'Kinship Ties', pp. 248-250.



	Total Number of Contracts	Number of Contracts Signed by Bride's Widowed Mother	% of Contracts Signed by Bride's Widowed Mother
1590s, 1st Marriage Contracts	218	36	16.51%
1630s, 1st Marriage Contracts	231	26	11.26%
1590s, Widows' Marriage Contracts	27	2	7.47%
1630s, Widows' Marriage Contracts	45	2	4.44%

**Table 5.1**, showing the total number of marriage contracts found for first and second marriages in the 1590s and 1630s, and the numbers within those totals which noted the bride’s widowed mother as a signatory.<sup>26</sup>

In order to put this evidence about widowed mothers representing their children into proper context here, it must be remembered that certainly less than half of these brides would have had a widow as their main guardian and so it is indicative that such a large proportion of widowed mothers felt themselves able to represent their children in this legal capacity. That widowed mothers were less frequently involved when the daughter was also widowed is not surprising. The daughter, often older anyway, would perhaps have been more capable of handling her own contract.

Morten Crabb has shown how influential a widow could be in the life of her children, offering the example of Alessandra Strozzi, who chose husbands for her daughters, oversaw the education of all her children, and was extensively involved in the search for wives for her sons in exile.<sup>27</sup> Although her circumstances were extraordinary, Crabb has concluded that her activities were not and that many Florentine widows performed similar duties for their offspring. The evidence from the *Bulla D'Oro* and the marriage contracts suggests that the situation was similar for Venice and that widows were involved in making arrangements for their children. It is interesting to note that the successful Venetian humanist Francesco Barbaro was among many who were brought up by widowed mothers, showing that it was not necessarily a disadvantage to educational and intellectual life to be raised, in the main, by a woman. Contemporary writers

<sup>26</sup> ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, B. 113/3, 114/4, 117/7 and 118/8 were used for this survey.



such as Barbaro in fact had much to say on how a lone widow should raise children, most emphasising the need to encourage modesty and honesty among their offspring, and suggesting that they involve male relatives in the education of boys particularly. Chojnacki has concluded that husbands recognised the benefits for sons in being brought up by their mothers, both financial and familial.<sup>28</sup> Women could still put sons through the *Balla D'Oro* and act in a legal capacity for daughters so, as long as remarriage was avoided, husbands encouraged widowhood guardianship.

Examination of the financial aspects of a widow's life can help establish the closeness of relationships between Venetian widows and their children. The law, with regard to inheritance from a mother, allowed for equal shares for male and female offspring when the mother died intestate, but in fact, in Venice, women were the most prolific writers of wills, as they faced death on the birth of every child. The amounts left by widows may not only show what regard they held their children in, but also the need they attributed to each child. In the case of Cornelia Querini for example, her sons are left only token amounts, but with much affection attached, while the daughter in need of a dowry is given a larger gift.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> A. Morten Crabb, 'How Typical was Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi', pp. 47-68.

<sup>28</sup> S. Chojnacki, "'The Most Serious Duty'", pp. 143-148.



<i>Number of beneficiaries per will</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>number not known</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Relationship of beneficiary to the widow</b>							
<b>Son</b>	4	10	9	3	10	1 case	36
<b>Daughter</b>	6	4					10
<b>Husband</b>	2						2
<b>Nephew</b>	1		3		4		8
<b>Niece</b>	2			4	1		7
<b>Brother</b>	1						1
<b>Sister</b>	1						1
<b>Uncle</b>	1						1
<b>Grandson</b>				1			1
<b>Brother-in-law</b>	1						1
<b>Sister-in-law</b>						1 case	?
<b>Unspecified Male</b>		2					2
<b>Unspecified Female</b>	1						1
<b>Priest</b>	1						1
<b>Total number of beneficiaries</b>	21	16	12	8	15	2	72
<b>Total number of wills</b>	21	8	4	2	3	2	40

**Table 5.2**, noting the main recipient/recipients of the *Residuo* of the widow's property with the number of beneficiaries per will. For example, in the first column there were 21 wills, each with the *Residuo* going to only one beneficiary. In the second column, there were 8 wills, each noting two beneficiaries of the *Residuo*, hence a total of 16 beneficiaries. A total of 40 wills were used to create this table, i.e. all those from the 50 complete wills sampled which noted a *Residuo*.<sup>30</sup>

There are a number of problems with the table which need to be clarified. In the cases where the number of beneficiaries was not known, the first bequest was made by Laura di Santi to 'all my sons', and the second by Cornelia Franceschi to 'the sisters of my husband'.<sup>31</sup> A further problem is with the terms *Nezza* and *Nepote*. While the use of these is frequently qualified with the phrases 'son of my sister', or 'daughter of my son' for example, when this is

<sup>29</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Crivelli, B. 220, no 521.

<sup>30</sup> The wills used to create these statistics are listed in Chapter 2, footnote 15. While a total of 51 wills were sample, only 50 have been used in the creation of these statistics because one was incomplete.

<sup>31</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Frizzo, B. 1178, no. 286 and Atti Beni, B. 160, no. 130.



not done they can mean either nephew and niece, or grandson and granddaughter. For the purpose of this table and those found later in this chapter, unless specified they have been taken to mean nephew and niece. The main reason for this is that, particularly where they are found as executors (see Table 5.3 below), it is more likely to have been nieces and nephews, as grandchildren tended not to be old enough to act as executors.

Given that the *Residuo* was probably the most significant section of a widow’s property, the beneficiaries of this type of bequest tell us much about widow/family relations. With grandsons also included under the title ‘Offspring’, we can see that 47 offspring were the recipients of all or part of the *Residuo*, and if it was shared it was most frequently with other offspring. Sons did significantly better than daughters, but there were perhaps two reasons for this, firstly that girls were more likely to be left a specific amount for a dowry, or an annuity if they were in a convent, and less likely to be given unspecified property. The second reason for this could have been a straightforward preference for male offspring, but may also be an indication that widows were conforming to the tradition that property should pass through the male line. Whatever the reasons, however, we can see that offspring were the main beneficiaries of residual property, and that, where they were not, this was often because there were no offspring or because those offspring were in the priesthood or in convents.

Number of executor s per will	Number of wills of that type		Offsprin g	Natal Family	Marital Family	Non-Family	Total
1	12		4 (1)	3 (1)	1	4	12 (2)
2	4		0	4 (2)	0	4	8 (2)
3	8		5 (1)	11 (2)	1	7	24 (3)
4	3		7 (1)	3 (1)	1 (1)	1 (1)	12 (4)
5	3		6	5 (1)	2 (1)	2	15 (2)
6	1		2 (1)	3	1 (1)	0	6 (2)
7	1		3	3	0	1	7
8	1		4 (1)	2	0	2	8 (1)
Total	33		31 (5)	34 (7)	6 (3)	21 (1)	92 (16)

**Table 5.3:** Noting executors to widows’ wills. The 33 wills sampled here are all those from the total sample of 51 which noted executors. Figures in brackets indicate the number of females included within the total.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> For the purposes of this table, ‘Offspring’ includes sons, daughters, grandchildren and sons and daughters-in-law. ‘Natal Family’ includes parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews. Sisters and brothers-in-law are noted only if they were husband or wife of the widow’s brother or sister. ‘Marital



Ability as well as trust was taken into account when executors were chosen, but nevertheless, the appointments can reveal closeness of family relations. In the sample taken from sixteenth and seventeenth-century wills it is evident that offspring, once of age, were frequently chosen as executors, either partial or sole, although not quite as frequently as would be expected given the evidence of offspring as heirs. The fact that natal family were chosen slightly more frequently probably has less to do with widows' trust in their children and more to do with the age of the children at the time the will was written. Widows close to their children trusted them to administer what could be substantial estates, but only where those children were old enough to manage that responsibility. Widows also recognised that it was difficult for women to be involved in substantial tasks of administration, and requested daughters, or daughters-in-law to be executors on only five occasions. Only once was a daughter sole executor.

Another common form of financial dealings between mothers and children was in dowry reclamation cases. It was not unusual for husbands to instruct their children not to obstruct their mother in the removal of her dowry or any other inheritance he might have granted her, as did Giovanni Cortese.<sup>33</sup> Doubtless this was sometimes effective, but on other occasions widows petitioning for their dowries could face much opposition. That the conduct of the majority of cases sampled for this thesis appears to have been relatively smooth suggests that opposition was not that common, but there was potential for sons to feel robbed of their inheritance through the removal of their mother's dowry from the patrimony.<sup>34</sup>

The widow was not always in a position of power though. While the offspring and family of a wealthy woman could be reliant on inheritance from her, it was not uncommon for the widow with only a small dowry to become dependent on the kindness of their sons. There was a need for understanding in both directions. That family co-operation could work, however, is seen in the contract of Giulia Donà, who married Domenico Molin in 1594. It was noted within the contract that her widowed mother was acting for her but with the express agreement of Giulia's brothers and sisters. It was clearly felt that, with dowries so often commandeering such a large

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'Family' includes all others noted as 'in-laws', and the nieces and nephews noted specifically as of the marital family, i.e. son of her husband's brother. 'Non-Family' refers to those who are noted but without mention of any familial link and includes priests and employers.

The wills used for this sample are noted in Chapter 2, footnote 15.

<sup>33</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Brinis, Girolamo, B. 32, no. 443.

<sup>34</sup> Klapisch-Zuber's "Cruel Mother" caused such resentment in her son that he wrote about it in later adulthood. C. Klapisch-Zuber, "'The Cruel Mother'"



proportion of the family finances, the other siblings who would be affected should have some say in such an agreement, although it was their widowed mother who was trusted to make the contract.<sup>35</sup>

The sources used to establish the nature of relations between widows and their children can be similarly used to give evidence of their relationships with their natal and marital families. Who widows chose as executors and beneficiaries and where they chose to be buried all contribute to what we know about retained contact with these relatives. With dowries sometimes including hospitality for the couple, the Venetian woman might have never lived away from her natal home, but more often than not the woman left her family and moved in, either with the family of her new husband or with him alone.<sup>36</sup> Apart from their financial obligation to pay the dowry, personal relations were the only reason women needed to retain contacts with their natal families, so it is interesting to see how far they did so, even when some left the home at 15 and lived in another family for 20 or more years. It has been suggested for Florence that the only reason a woman's family would maintain contact would be because, potentially, the dowry could be reclaimed, although provision was sometimes made for the woman to return to her natal home on widowhood (the rights to *tornate* and *alimenti*). What has been seen already for Venice is that contact, with both female and male relatives from the natal family, continued throughout married life.<sup>37</sup> Ferraro among others has shown that natal family support during marriage could be crucial if the husband was mismanaging funds or ill-treating his wife, and she needed to take action.<sup>38</sup>

On widowhood, women also called upon their natal relatives, both male and female to help administer property and act for them in legal transactions. The case of 'Giovanni and Lusanna' in Florence showed that once a woman was widowed it was her natal family she often called upon, and Brucker interestingly asserts that it was the status of Lusanna's natal family which was beneficial to her in getting her case heard.<sup>39</sup> When widows were contracting second marriages for themselves in Venice, if they were to call on anyone for assistance, it would be their natal families, especially as the families of first husbands were likely to disapprove of

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<sup>35</sup> Two contracts found. ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, B. 114/4 (1592-1604), p. 690 and ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, Patrizi X, p. 116.

<sup>36</sup> A. Bellavitis, 'La Famiglia "Cittadina"', p. 65.

<sup>37</sup> C. Klapisch-Zuber, "'The Cruel Mother'", pp. 118-123.

<sup>38</sup> J. M. Ferraro, 'The Power to Decide', p. 502.

<sup>39</sup> G. A. Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna*.



second marriage altogether.<sup>40</sup> Klapisch-Zuber has suggested that in fact Florentine widows frequently put their natal families first, removing their dowries at the expense of their children to make a new match for the benefit of their natal kin, although how far this was evident in Venice is debatable, purely because of the volume of widows so clearly remaining with their children.<sup>41</sup>

Table 5.2 shows the maintenance of connections through bequests. Out of 72 recipients of all or part of the *Residuo*, 18 were from the natal family and in fact only seven bequests went outside the realms of offspring or natal family. It is also telling about the nature of relations between widows and their families that of those 18, 8 of the bequests went to female relatives. This indicates that female family networks were often the reason widows remained in contact with the family into which they had been born.

Bequests of capital or property are an important indicator of family relations but were often made out of duty or affection. Executorship was granted more as a sign of maintained trust between the widow and her parents, siblings and other relatives. Table 5.3 has shown that natal relatives were in fact those most frequently called upon to act as executors. Even where there were offspring, as in the cases noted where there were 6, 7, and 8 named executors, natal family were called upon to preside jointly. Executorship also emphasises what was seen in the bequests, with 7 out of the sixteen female executors appointed from the natal family. Personal, as well as practical reasons could influence the choices widows made.

Further indicators of family relations provided by wills are instructions for burial. Only 12 out of the 51 widows' wills used stated a preference about with whom they wished to be buried but they indicate a lingering identification with the natal family. Two widows requested to be buried with their sons, 4 with their husbands, but 6 with their natal family, including two with their mothers, one with her sister and mother, one with just her sister, one in her uncle's vault and one in the monastery where her sister was abbess. Because it was exceptional for a specific request to be made, the assumption being perhaps that if it was not stated the widow would automatically be buried with her husband, not too many conclusions should be drawn from these figures. However, they indicate that some widows felt that their final resting place should be with their natal family.

Retained contact with natal family could also be for more pragmatic reasons, as on widowhood some women were left destitute. Those unable to reclaim dowries, or whose dowries

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<sup>40</sup> Regina Barozzi's mother was actually her main representative in her second marriage contract, but it was more normal for the representative to be the widow's brother, as is seen in the examples of Bianca Michiel and Marcella Barbaro.

ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, B. 118 8, no. 1906, and B. 114/4, nos. 622 and 686.



were small, could become dependent on their natal families. As noted already, in Florence the natal family were customarily called upon to provide for the widow but in Venice this was not the case. Some fathers provided for daughter's widowhoods in their wills, but the residency figures show that it was rare for widows to return to live with their parents permanently.<sup>42</sup> More common was the co-residence of two sisters, who could not afford to live alone, or the accommodation of a widowed sister with her brother's family.<sup>43</sup> Diefendorf suggests that in Paris family pressure "discouraged patrician widows from living independently", but the numbers living alone in Venice indicate that such pressure can only have been successfully applied in a small number of cases, if at all.<sup>44</sup> Although the potential for remarriage remained, the widow was protected from being forced, by her family, into too hasty a decision by the obligatory mourning period.<sup>45</sup>

The very fact of the dowry as the widow's means of survival meant that in her widowhood she was dependent on the original generosity of her natal family as well as on her husband, who was legally required to return that property to her.<sup>46</sup> The goodwill of the husband, children and marital family was also important for a smooth and rapid return of the dowry.<sup>47</sup> Once a dowry of reasonable size had been reclaimed the widow was less dependent on both branches of family, but until that point her fate was much out of her own hands. Cowan has pointed out that it was not clear whether the natal or the marital family was responsible for women on widowhood, but it can be said that it was simultaneously both and neither.<sup>48</sup>

Affinal ties were also important to the Venetian patriciate, and it would be foolish to assume that on the death of the husband they were simply severed. We can rarely know how far wives were integrated into the families of their husbands during marriage, but through wills and other documentary evidence some idea can be gained of how far these ties remained after widowhood. In biblical times it was not uncommon for a widow to marry her husband's brother, in the Levirate tradition, but by the Middle Ages such marriages were prohibited, not least

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<sup>41</sup> C. Klapisch-Zuber, "The Cruel Mother", pp. 126-130.

<sup>42</sup> M. L. King, *Women of the Renaissance*, p. 59.

<sup>43</sup> One example of this found in the Decima, was of Chiara Diedo, widow of Zuanne Tron, who lived with her brother Mario Diedo. ASV, Dieci Savi Sopra le Decime in Rialto, B. 168, no. 586.

<sup>44</sup> B. B. Diefendorf, 'Family Culture', pp. 677-8.

<sup>45</sup> C. Calisse, *History of Italian Law*, p. 542.

See Chapter 6 for more detail on remarriage.

<sup>46</sup> D. Owen Hughes, 'From Brideprice to Dowry', p. 278.

<sup>47</sup> That good will from the marital family was not always available was seen in the case of Eleonora Papafava, who was still in dispute with the relatives of her first husband when she came to make the contract for her second marriage.

ASV, AdC, Contratti di Nozze, B. 117/7, no. 1785.



because the church wanted to restrict marriages which concentrated property. Further to this was an aim of restricting marriages between two members of the same household, as wife and brother-in-law would have been in a *fraterna* household. Occasionally a special dispensation would be granted allowing such a marriage to take place, but this was rare.<sup>49</sup>

In the Netherlands the wife's bond with her husband and his family remained because of the frequency with which widows were supported by annuity.<sup>50</sup> In Venice the annuity was not so common, but the *Contradotta* was found more frequently than has been believed in the past.<sup>51</sup> In marriage contracts it is rare to find these payments noted, but they come to light in the dowry reclamation cases of the *Giudici del Proprio*. 30 out of 77 cases of reclamation, where some payment of dowry was made, included the payment of a *Contradotta*. This is significant, as where such a payment was made, the widow and her in-laws were connected by more than just the return to the widow of property, which by rights she owned anyway. It was the alienation of family property. Izbicki notes that it was "a common tendency of Italian jurists to favour the interests of the deceased husband's blood kindred at the expense of those of his widow" but evidence from dowry reclamation cases suggests that the majority of widows trying to reclaim property got at least two thirds of what they were reclaiming and mostly within a year of the request.<sup>52</sup>

The number of widows residing with the marital family was very small, only 16 widows within the survey lived with their parents-in-law. Again this figure is of little use without information from wills showing the continuing relations between families.<sup>53</sup> We can see from Table 5.3 that contact between some widows and their marital families could remain close after the death of the husband, with 6 executors coming from the marital family, including three women. Only one marital relative was named as sole recipient of the *Residuo* of a widow. Maria Bembo left everything to her husband's brother Francesco who she identified with terms of great affection.<sup>54</sup> The exact nature of their relationship we cannot determine but it was certainly a close one, continuing after the end of the formal marriage bond between the two families. Cornelia Franceschi left the *Residuo* of her property to her husband's sisters; however she did not name

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<sup>48</sup> A. F. Cowan, *The Urban Patriciate*, p. 111.

<sup>49</sup> See A. F. Cowan, 'Love, Honour and the Avogaria di Comun', p. 10. Case given of Laura dal Sol who was able to marry a cousin.

<sup>50</sup> Y. Kuiper, 'Noble Widow', p. 154.

<sup>51</sup> See Chapter 4 for more information on the *Contradotta* and Chapter 2, footnote 9 for exact details of the *Giudici del Proprio* records used.

<sup>52</sup> T. M. Izbicki, 'Two Consiglia', p. 48.

See Chapter 4 for more information on dowry reclamation.

<sup>53</sup> M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*, p. 185.



them or even say how many of them there were.<sup>55</sup> Marital relatives were more likely to receive bequests outside the *Residuo*, and in smaller token gestures made by the widow. Family loyalty was clearly still connected to the natal over the marital family, as far as trust and money was concerned, however long the widow had been within her husband's family.

The idea that widows left more to female relatives than did men also deserves consideration. Queller and Madden have made a study of the phenomenon of women donating to other women's dowries in the fourteenth century and note that, although both men and women still left the majority of their property to sons, female donations in Venice were important for pushing the dowry size up. They put forward the idea that dowries were "a barometer of female-held wealth".<sup>56</sup> There were a number of reasons why widows might have been involved in such calculated giving and affection certainly had a part to play. Evidence about female contact between families noted earlier also suggests that assistance with dowries could be part of a wider system of female patronage. Many widows were in a position to make a difference to the lives of female relatives, and they were perhaps keen to encourage the growth of property holding in female hands.

What we can conclude here is that many widows left some property to other women but that the amounts of property left were often equalled or surpassed by those left to men, in particular male offspring. The *Residuo* was far more frequently left to sons, although where there were no sons the division was much more equal between the sexes, with nieces getting only slightly fewer bequests than nephews. The idea that widows left bequests to influence the dowry size of others should not be ruled out because of this study of the *Residuo* alone, however. It was often with separate bequests, rather than through the *Residuo* that widows gave money to relatives and other girls to assist with their marriage.

Not all widows had family, and others may have had bad relationships with kin so it is necessary to consider alternatives to the family. The most obvious way in which widows were able to create new family-like environments for themselves at this time was through entry into a convent. In the sixteenth century Venice's convents were facing an enormous influx of girls, in part due to the increasing restrictions on numbers marrying. In 1581 Venice had 31 nunneries and 2,500 nuns, and many patrician women had friends or relatives in religious orders with some

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<sup>54</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Bianco, B. 127, no. 702.

<sup>55</sup> ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Beni, B. 160, no. 130.

<sup>56</sup> D. F. Queller and T. F. Madden, 'Father of the Bride', pp. 697-99.



convents housing members of one family over generations.<sup>57</sup> Religion was an influential factor in the lives of many Venetian women. The Catholic Church gave women independence, within the privacy of confession for example, and local loyalties often were based on the parish. Martin notes that Catholic women formed networks in Venice, as did groups of female heretics, and religious loyalties could outlive marital life and take a greater part in the life of the woman on widowhood.<sup>58</sup> Death of a husband could also lead a woman to consider a religious life even if she had not been particularly interested before.

Evidence from wills shows that 31 out of 51 surveyed made some kind of bequest to a religious or charitable institution and the '*ospedali*' were the most frequently mentioned destination for gifts. Large bequests were also often left to pay for masses. Although similar donations can of course be found in men's wills and the expression of religious devotion through testamentary bequests is not exclusively a widowhood activity, nevertheless, its frequency shows the continuing importance of religious belief and activity to Venetian women who lost their husbands.

Entry into a convent on widowhood whether for religious or more practical reasons, was not necessarily a simple process, as widows needed papal dispensation to take full vows and Calisse notes that, under some sections of Italian law, widows could not enter convents until the official period of mourning was up.<sup>59</sup> In fact widows often lived in convents without taking vows, or only *Converse* vows. Not being fully professed nuns did not prevent these women, often patricians with much experience of running households, from being intimately involved in the running of the religious houses though. *Converse* were known to remain in convents for twenty years or more and Baernstein suggests that, in Milan, convents actually fought for the loyalty and the money of widows.<sup>60</sup> Primhak offers examples of Venetian widows as *Converse* in S. Servolo but notes that the small numbers she has discovered may have been only the tip of an iceberg as *Converse* were less frequently noted in records than were full nuns.<sup>61</sup> Early modern Venice also had a number of alternatives to the convent.

Widowhood for some "signalled a descent into destitution", and the need for support is seen most clearly in the evidence about the numbers of widows appealing to the Venetian *Scuole*

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<sup>57</sup> Of the wills surveyed for this chapter, 5 contained requests that money go to female relatives in religious orders, three to sons who were priests and another to a brother who was also a priest.

<sup>58</sup> J. Martin, 'Out of the Shadow', pp. 29-30.

<sup>59</sup> C. Calisse, *History of Italian Law*, p. 542.

<sup>60</sup> P. Renee Baernstein, 'In Widow's Habit', p. 787.

<sup>61</sup> V. J. Primhak, *Women in Religious Communities*, pp. 113-118.



and charities for assistance.<sup>62</sup> Fior Memmo, for example, noted in her tax declaration that she was living in a house owned or rented to her by the *Scuola Grande di San Rocco*, similar to alms houses found in England.<sup>63</sup>

More institutional, rather than purely charitable support, can be seen in the role played by religious and secular institutions. Third order communities offered widows an alternative to the convent: some of these were enclosed, while others operated on a more open basis. There is need for a great deal more research into the role played by the tertiary orders in the lives of widows, as what little we know thus far comes from studies of individuals and from a small number of wills. 21 out of 51 widows requested burial in a habit including 3 noting simply '*pizzochere*', 5 '*pizzochere della Madonna*', and two others '*pizzochere di S. Stefano e S. Francesco*'. While it was not uncommon for married men even to request burial in the robes of a particular order, the numbers found here seem a significant sign that widows wanted to associate themselves in death with networks beyond their families, and that the third orders were particularly important and relevant to their lives. Some of these wills were almost certainly from widows who requested entry to the orders only at time of death, but others may have entered the orders and lived within their communities for many years.

As well as tertiary orders, other institutions and hospitals catered for the needs of widows. Much work has been done on this type of institution elsewhere, but on Venice work is only now beginning in detail.<sup>64</sup> The Orbatello in Florence is an interesting example of this type of institution. Founded in 1370, by the sixteenth century it offered refuge to 58 widows and their children. The house was intended for poor women of good repute, those with children and those who could not afford the expensive convent dowry. It offered these widows some privacy and independence, but also the support of an institution. Matrons, from within the institution, ruled with the nominal assistance of priests, and older women managed administration, offering dowries to daughters, and other assistance. Only after 1550 did its use change, as overcrowding meant rooms designated for widows were used for other purposes.<sup>65</sup> Other institutions in Florence catered for ex-prostitutes, battered women, young girls, but it is interesting that widows were considered worthy and important enough to need an institution of their own.

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<sup>62</sup> I. Chabot, 'Widowhood and Poverty', p. 293.

<sup>63</sup> ASV, Dieci Savi Sopra le Decime in Rialto, B. 168, no. 445.

<sup>64</sup> See P. Renee Baernstein, 'In Widow's Habit'.

M. L. King, *Women of the Renaissance*, pp. 81-153.

R. C. Trexler, *The Women of Renaissance Florence*.

Sherril Cohen, *The Evolution of Women's Asylums*.

<sup>65</sup> All information about the Orbatello is taken from R. Trexler, *The Women of Renaissance Florence*.



Trexler has noted that in Venice care of widows was a parish obligation, but little evidence of this has yet emerged.<sup>66</sup> What is now coming to light is evidence that Venice's hospitals, of which there were over 40 by the sixteenth century, often provided for widows, particularly because widows were noted as '*Poveri Vergognosi*', deserving poor, by the 1528 poor law.<sup>67</sup> Wealthy testators often founded charitable institutions and a number have been found which housed widows over the Renaissance and early modern periods. Semi talks about the flowering of *ospedali* and *ospizi* in the counter-reformation and notes that they were not just for old people.<sup>68</sup> The institutions complemented the forms of assistance already available to the poor of Venice.

Among the institutions which grew up in Venice from the Renaissance were a number which catered specifically for widows.<sup>69</sup> The earliest of these, which continued to house widows into the early modern period, was the *Ospedaletto della Maddalena*, in the sestier of Dorsoduro. It was a private institution which housed both widows and young girls, up to eight in number, founded by Gabriele and Luciano Prior, and administered by the Corner family from the beginning of the sixteenth century. It certainly remained in its original form until the eighteenth century, with some reports suggesting that it housed tertiaries. Today it is made up of small apartments maintaining the original function.<sup>70</sup> A similar example is that of the *Ospizio Aletti*, founded in 1375 with the will of widow Bonafemina Aletti. It was to cater for widows of good reputation, up to 11 in number and was under the vigilance of the *Procuratia di Supra*. Again activity continued well into the twentieth century, although its location moved from S. Moise to S. Giobbe and it now only houses 6 women.<sup>71</sup>

The first fifteenth-century foundation for widows was the *Ospizio Foscolo* (otherwise known as the *Ospizio delle Donne della Scuola dei Marinieri di San Nicolo*), again taking the name of the founder, Lucia Foscolo. In her will she noted that she wanted some of her '*casette*' to be homes for widows, and they had to pay once only, 40 ducats for rooms on the first floor and 20 ducats on the ground floor, a great deal less than convent entry. This too survives to the present day in the Fondamenta S. Anna, although now only housing 6 women. It is interesting to

<sup>66</sup> R. Trexler, *The Women of Renaissance Florence* p. 68.

<sup>67</sup> R. C. Mueller, 'Charitable Institutions', p. 54. Unfortunately neither Mueller or Pullan note where they got information about widows in *ospedali*.

<sup>68</sup> For all information on widows in institutions in Venice see F. Semi, *Gli "Ospizi"*.

<sup>69</sup> Pullan suggests that the Ca di Dio housed widows for part of its history; however, Semi notes its inhabitants only as 'women' so it has not been included within this section of research.

B. Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, p. 425.

F. Semi, *Gli "Ospizi"*, p. 50 and p. 70.

<sup>70</sup> F. Semi, *Gli "Ospizi"*, pp. 261-263.



note from its alternative name that at some point it must have been attached to the *Scuola dei Marineri*, suggesting that *Scuola* members wanted to care for their widows and had funds specifically set aside to do so.<sup>72</sup> The *Ospizio de Tommasi* founded in 1456 offered rooms to 12 poor widows, but with more conditions attached than were seen in other institutions. These conditions reflected humanist writings about the nature of widowhood and advice on how the widow should behave. The women were to pay 12 ducats each, if they worked it was to be honest works, and they must dress decently and pray for the dead.<sup>73</sup>

Noble widows had their own institution, the *Ospizio Morosini*, founded by Marco Morosini in 1492 with houses purchased particularly for the purpose of housing poor noble widows, to which more were added in 1528. These widows also received 50 ducats at Easter and Christmas as well as part of any residual property which remained after Morosini's estate had been divided. These women were clearly a concern close to his heart.<sup>74</sup> Widows with children, a group not catered for by the convents or third orders, were also granted an institution of their own at the end of the seventeenth century. The *Ospizio Morosini or Grimani* in San Simeon Grande was, by provision of Pietro Morosini's will, to be a 36 room *Ospizio*, or 24 room if the structure was not big enough, for poor but honourable widows, with at least one son in their guardianship. These women had to be pious and their parish priests were required to testify to the fact. 5,000 ducats were left for the restoration and the only obligation was that the widows pray for him at Easter and Christmas. An inscription stating Pietro Morosini's role in the creation of the institution in fact remained on the building until 1960, when changes rendered it illegible.<sup>75</sup>

The final institution to be considered here is the *Ospedale dei Crociferi*, which, although not specifically designated for widows, did include widows of soldiers from the war against the Turks among its inhabitants for a time. It is also an important building which, surviving today in its original location of Campo dei Gesuiti, still houses widows among its number, and also contains the paintings of Palma il Giovane, depicting women, some of whom appear to be dressed in widows weeds.<sup>76</sup> Founded by the *Crociferi* fathers in 1150 it began life as a convent, and the *Ospizio - Ospedale* was added in 1155, to be used for the maintenance of 12 poor

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<sup>71</sup> F. Semi, *Gli "Ospizi"*, pp. 161-162.

<sup>72</sup> F. Semi, *Gli "Ospizi"*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>73</sup> F. Semi, *Gli "Ospizi"*, pp. 168-169.

<sup>74</sup> F. Semi, *Gli "Ospizi"*, p. 170.

<sup>75</sup> F. Semi, *Gli "Ospizi"*, pp. 245-247. The original inscription on the building said:

"Hospitale de Povere Vedove eretto et instituito gratis per il testamento della buona memoria del Nobil Veneto Ser Preio Moresini, fu del Ser Zuane".

<sup>76</sup> Part of one of these images, depicting the Doge and Dogaressa, as well as a number of women, probably 'ospizi', is found on the front of Semi's book, another on page 186.



widows chosen, until 1664, by the Priors of the *Crociferi*. After that time it fell under the jurisdiction of the *Procuratia de Citra* and was destined to accommodate the widows of the soldiers killed in the war against the Turks. Today it has 14 rooms and depends on the *Casa di Riposo* of *Santi Giovanni and Paolo* for funding.<sup>77</sup>

Doubtless many other institutions numbered widows among their inmates, but it is interesting to see that there were so many institutions designated specifically for widows. The issue of widowhood poverty, even for noble widows, was recognised, taken seriously and steps were taken to combat it. Refuges could improve the widow's material situation but also protect her honour, something which concerned contemporaries. Some poor widows were able to enter convents as servants but the majority made their own living arrangements, with children, family or alone. *Ospedali* offered an alternative to either of these options. Widows could also be involved in institutions as executors and guardians, particularly in institutions offering shelter to other women. Chojnacka has looked at the *Zitelle* on the Giudecca, and notes that widows involved in administering this institution often took a very personal interest in the destinations of the girls leaving it, suggesting that female bonds were built in these institutions even when widows were not the ones receiving assistance.<sup>78</sup>

Other support for widows living outside family or institution came from friends and the community at large. Although thus far little is really known about of the extent of female networks, and other neighbourhood support systems, evidence is emerging from legal cases. Those of the Inquisition used by Chojnacka, the *Prove di Nobiltà* of the *Avogaria di Comun*, used by Cowan, the *Raspe* of the *Avogaria di Comun* used by Ruggiero, and the *Causarum Matrimonialium* used by Ferraro, all offer evidence of female networks of support beyond kin.<sup>79</sup> Work on the *Examinum Matrimoniorum*, where widows were required to prove that their husbands had really died, has shown that it was not only family and female friends whom widows called upon for support, but also close friends of their husbands, and neighbours. From a sample of 31 cases, containing 64 witnesses, only 9 witnesses were female, and only 2 others were relatives of the wife, one brother and one son.<sup>80</sup> Additionally three were relatives of the

<sup>77</sup> F. Semi, *Gli "Ospizi"*, pp. 184-186.

<sup>78</sup> M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*, pp. 41 ff.

<sup>79</sup> M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*.

A. Cowan, 'Love, Honour and the Avogaria di Comun'.

Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros*.

J. M. Ferraro, 'The Power to Decide', pp. 492-512.

<sup>80</sup> The samples used were taken from the ACPV. *Examinum Matrimoniorum*, B. 27, 32 and 37. Of the 64 witnesses who made statements, two were the widows themselves, 3 close relations of her, 3 of her husband. Four were neighbours, not claiming to know either husband or wife well, 8 were friends of the widow, 4



husband, but the majority of witnesses called by widows to testify to the legitimacy of their marriage and their widowhood were in fact male friends, either of the couple together, or of the husband, including men of the same trade, or from the same location in the Veneto.

Having examined the widow's relationships with her family and also the alternatives to family support which the early modern Venetian widow had access to, we can now draw several conclusions. It is clear that families were very important to Venetian widows. Women with supportive families were in a more powerful position as widows than immigrant women for example, but equally the more powerful the family and the more crucial the woman to family strategy or honour, the less likely she was to maintain control of her independence, financial or personal. King even suggests that Venetians showed a unique lack of "nurturing concern for the individual" when family issues were at stake. However, wills, and the other information used here suggest that family closeness was more flexible than that.<sup>81</sup>

Dowry wealth and other property held by widows could really influence family life. It has been suggested that wives were more valuable to the family than widows, and this is perhaps true as far as honour, reproduction and patrimony is concerned, but once a widow had reclaimed her dowry, if it was substantial then the potential for influence was in place. Family membership was not just about financial contributions either, but also about responsibility, duty, and affection.

A number of inferences may be drawn about the Venetian widow and her family ties. It was common that relations with children were close, that guardianship by widows was normal, and that widows often benefited both male and female children in their wills. It is also true that widows were generally close to natal kin, although they were frequently without parents themselves by the time they reached widowhood. Relations with marital kin, even once dowries had been removed, did not have to be bad and the maintenance of close relations can be seen in wills, although they were less frequently close than those with natal kin. Widows who did not have close family networks were often able to find support from other women, in convents and other institutions, or within their own neighbourhoods. Widowhood did not have to be poor, lonely, solitary; there were a great variety of possibilities.

We can also conclude that widows were a very integral part of the Venetian family, evident in households in many positions. They were involved in family finance, legal

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were employers or relatives of employers, one was a priest and the remaining 39 were friends of the husband or the couple.



negotiations, even politics, through the *Balla D'Oro*. They administered estates and institutions, raised and educated children, and were influential in the lives of natal and marital families, whether through their own pro-activity or as pawns in the machinations of others. There is of course a danger of projecting modern family relationships onto the early modern widow, but at the same time, it is important to remember that families did involve human relationships, not just political, legal, reproductive and financial activities.

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<sup>81</sup> M. L. King, *Women of the Renaissance*, p. 47.



## Female Remarriage in Early Modern Venice – Chapter 6

In the early modern period, the death of a spouse was the most common way for a marriage to end. In many cases this meant the conclusion of married life for the remaining partner, but a significant number went on to contract further marriages. Griggs has commented that a knowledge of the influences on the likelihood of remarriage is “essential to an appreciation of the personal and social consequences of widowhood”.<sup>1</sup> This chapter considers the numbers of widows remarrying in early modern Venice and suggests some of the factors affecting the frequency of remarriage. Recent studies of widowhood have raised the question of the position of the remarrying widow. Until the point of remarriage she was most certainly still a widow but after the nuptials she was also a wife; however, the status conferred by widowhood was not necessarily lost on remarriage.<sup>2</sup> Remarried widows sometimes continued to control property and maintain positions of authority they would have been unable to hold during their first marriages.

The issue of remarriage exposes the attitudes of men towards the lone female. The widow was encouraged to preserve her sacred celibacy, but also to remain within the sphere of male control. Remarriage was only one of a number of options which the widow could adopt, however. Chapter 5 discusses in more detail alternatives to it, looking at residency patterns and family relations. This chapter aims to establish a picture of the wider marital situation in the Venice of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to provide a context for the research on remarriage. It will consider the restrictions placed upon the remarrying widow and the reasons for remarriage. The ideological constructs surrounding the issue of remarriage will be examined and a picture of contemporary opinions will be developed.

The period 1550-1650 in Venice was one which saw the demographic upheaval of several plague years and also one which saw changes in the make-up of the population. Hunecke has noted that between 1586 and 1642, the general population fell from 148,638 - 120,304 and that the percentage of nobles within that fell from 4.3% - 3.7%.<sup>3</sup> This decline has been mainly attributed to the policy of restricted marriage. With the increasing concentration of family wealth in property in the early modern period, the traditional division of the patrimony between all sons became increasingly difficult and impractical. Primogeniture had never been practised within the Venetian Republic and thus the entail of property, preventing it from being alienated, and a restriction on the numbers of brothers able to marry, were adopted as means of conservation.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Griggs, ‘Towards a Theory of Remarriage’, p. 183.

<sup>2</sup> M. Buitelaar, ‘Widow’s Worlds’, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> V. Hunecke, ‘Matrimonio e Demografia’, p. 284ff.



Chojnacki suggests that as early as the fifteenth century only 60% of adult patrician males were marrying anyway, showing that the single life was not an entirely new idea. but by the late sixteenth century this had been reduced further. to only one or two at the most per generation in many families.<sup>4</sup>

Hunecke has gone a good way to clarifying the marriage situation of the Venetian patrician class.<sup>5</sup> The reduction in numbers of men marrying meant a reduction in opportunities for patrician women to find husbands. Additionally, the numbers of girls marrying was affected by dowry inflation. A dowry could be a severe drain on family finances, particularly by the sixteenth century when dowry inflation was at its height, and even spiritual dowries were beyond the pockets of some of the poorer nobles. The period saw an influx of women into the convents, despite the increasing restrictions of Catholic reforms, and saw the occupation of unmarried females outside marriage and the convent. Greater freedom of choice in marriage was being offered to some girls through legacies from female relatives, and others were retained within the household to serve as housekeepers and governesses.<sup>6</sup> Just as patrician society was becoming increasingly divided between rich and poor so was the female patrician population. The system of patrilineal descent that took into account the pedigree of the mother as well as the father meant that the status of the woman in marriage was important and those gaining dowries could command great respect and manage great wealth while having no political position. However, others with no dowry but no other form of support either were forced to rely on the natal family and placed in a position of almost absolute powerlessness.

So where does the widow, and more importantly the remarrying widow fit into this picture in Venice? This research looks at the instance of remarriage of patrician widows between 1550 and 1650. Using the index of marriage organised by woman's name as a starting point for the research, and making checks on all the relevant sources used by the compiler of that index and those used by Hunecke, databases of all the registered marriages for the decades 1550-59, 1590-99 and 1630-39, have been created.<sup>7</sup> This has enabled the compilation of the figures for the

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<sup>4</sup> S. Chojnacki, "The Most Serious Duty", p. 147.

Davis notes this for the Venetian Donà family. J. C. Davis, *A Venetian Family*, pp. 93-108.

<sup>5</sup> V. Hunecke, 'Matrimonio e Demographia', pp. 269-319.

<sup>6</sup> Chojnacki notes that some mothers left money for their daughters' dowries but also offered them the opportunity to remain celibate within their father's or brother's house. S. Chojnacki, "The Most Serious Duty", pp. 151-154.

Cox notes that women in this new position of secular spinsterhood were called *Dimesse*. V. Cox, 'The Single Self', p. 549.

<sup>7</sup> ASV, Indice 86 ter 1 & 2.

For a complete list of sources used, see Chapter 2.



number of remarriages within that total. In 1526 the Council of Ten decreed that marriages had to be registered if the children were to be noble but there could be a variety of reasons for not registering, for example if there were no sons born to the match, if the wife was not noble, or at least not approved to marry a patrician, and thus her children not noble anyway, or if the marriage took place outside Venice.

As this survey concentrates on widows, widowerhood remarriage will be mentioned only for purposes of comparison. The study of the remarriage of widowers is particularly difficult because records of men remarrying often fail to mention the fact of a previous wife. Widows, more clearly defined by their relationships with men, are more often noted as widows, but, as the figures from Venice will show, there is no absolute certainty of that.

There are a variety of ways in which remarriage figures have been calculated in the past, some more useful to this study than others. It is instructive to bear in mind that if all who could have remarried did remarry, then the number of second marriages would have been the same as the number of first (although this does not take into account remarriage of a widow to a widower). This is the approach taken by Griggs who sees this as the optimum possible number of remarriages and considers her figures in relation to that optimum.<sup>8</sup> Because of the demographic information available for fifteenth-century Florence, the approach taken by several historians there has been to calculate the numbers of widows who remarried, from the known total residing in the city, and there it has been possible to calculate age-specific rates allowing for analysis of the effect of age on chances of remarriage. Some interesting figures have emerged from Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber's study of the *Catasto* of 1427.<sup>9</sup> They offer the number of widows remaining widows, which was 10% at the age of 40, 25% at 50 and 50% at 60, as evidence that remarriage was not all that common. Where sufficient information is available it is also possible to consider the relationship between remarriage and the number of children, and in connection with location and class. Unfortunately, the lack of such resources in Venice makes this impossible but there are alternatives. The one adopted by this study is to consider the number of remarriages within a given period as a percentage of the total number of marriages for the same period. This is similar to the approach taken by Ariès for seventeenth and eighteenth-century France, and he concludes

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Hunecke has noted that there are some omissions from the registers, and he suggests a figure of at most 10% of marriages.

V. Hunecke, 'Matrimonio e Demographia', pp. 303-4. Hunecke uses biographical research and parish registers to run a comparison with the numbers of registered marriages.

<sup>8</sup> S. Griggs, 'Towards a Theory of Remarriage', p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*, p. 217.



that one fifth of all marriages were remarriages.<sup>10</sup> Benigno, looking at the family in Southern Italy suggests that as many as one quarter of marriages were remarriages, with 15% involving widows.<sup>11</sup>

Demography offers great insight into remarriage but the figures offered, taken alone, show little about the implications of the remarriage pattern. Statistics need to be taken not only within the context of the local marriage pattern but also that of the demography of the period. In times of high mortality there was both more opportunity for second marriage and greater acceptance of it.

Hunecke notes that in Venice the annual registered marriage rate dropped between 1560 and 1650, quoting figures of 42.5 marriages annually between 1560 and 1570 and 30.8 annually between 1626 and 1650. This survey has additionally taken into account the *Cronica Matrimonia* which adds a relatively large number of marriages to the numbers for the first two decades considered, although it is not available for the 1630s. Comparison made between the registers, marriage contracts and the *Cronica Matrimonia* showed that, particularly for the 1550s, there were a large number of discrepancies. While it was decided to discount the additional marriages found if 1) any of the parties was from outside Venice, 2) either was illegitimate, 3) the man was *Cittadino* or *Popolano*, there were still some marriages unaccounted for except in the *Cronica Matrimonia*. An additional importance of the *Cronica Matrimonia* to the study of remarriage is that a higher percentage than would be expected of those references not noted elsewhere were the marriages of widows or occasionally widowers. Widowhood may in fact have been one of the reasons these marriages were not noted elsewhere, but this cannot be proved. Because of the problems of the use of the *Cronica Matrimonia*, conclusions have been drawn cautiously but nevertheless, it is a source of crucial importance to this study.<sup>12</sup>

The figures below show the total numbers of marriages found for each of the three decades chosen for this sampling, followed by the numbers of remarriages within the total number of marriages

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<sup>10</sup> P. Ariès, 'Remarriage in France', p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> F. Benigno, 'The Southern Italian Family', p. 173.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 2 for more detail on the *Cronica Matrimonia*.



Date	Total Number of Marriages	Number of Remarriages within that total	Percentage of Marriages which were Remarriages
1550-1559	635	51	8%
1590-1599	453	59	13%
1630-1639	361	47	13%

**Table 6.1** showing the total number of marriages for the 1550s, 1590s and 1630s and the number of remarriages.

From the 51 remarriage for the 1550s, 2 were of widows who remarried more than once. For the 1590s the number of third marriage was 15, and in the 1630s only 3 widows were found to have married for a third time. This partially explains why the number of remarriages was highest in the 1590s but does not explain why the percentage of remarriages continued to rise.

The figures noted above seem to fall in well with the general pattern of remarriage in Southern Europe for the early modern period, but they are particularly telling within the context of Venetian marriage trends. The work of Hunecke had shown that a fall in the total marriage figures for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries should be expected, and the figures for total marriages discovered by this study comply with those expectations. It was also expected, that the numbers of remarriage would fall accordingly, and the initial index survey carried out suggested that this was the case.

Date	Total number of marriages	Number of marriages found only in the <i>Cronica Matrimonia</i>	Total number of remarriages	Number of remarriages found only in the <i>Cronica Matrimonia</i>
1550s	635	103	51	23
1590s	453	38	59	17
1630s	361	0	47	0

**Table 6.2** showing, from the total numbers of marriages and remarriages, the number found only in the *Cronica Matrimonia* and in no other source, including the indexes.

Use of the *Cronica Matrimonia* brought to light a number of discrepancies and it was found that there were a large number of widows who were not registered in any other source. A



number of marriages for the 1550s were only found in the *Cronica Matrimonia* and 22% of those involved widows. This not only greatly increases the number of remarriages but also raises questions about why widows were so frequently among those registering their marriages only in the *Cronica Matrimonia*. For the 1590s, 44% of marriages found only in the *Cronica Matrimonia* involved widows. The *Cronica Matrimonia* does not cover the 1630s, but the *Contratti di Nozze*, also expose a large number of widows, 25 in fact, who, although they had their marriages registered, were not noted as widows within the marriage registration, only within the contract.<sup>13</sup> This raises the number of remarriages for the 1630s significantly too.

One explanation for the fact that numbers of female remarriages did not decline in line with general marriage figures is perhaps the fact that widows were women for whom no new dowry had to be provided. Once a woman had been granted a dowry by her family, it was easier for her to use it again, than for another woman to obtain a new dowry. Another reason is that, in times of high mortality, as this period of frequent plague certainly was, remarriage became increasingly acceptable as a means of population maintenance. It is also possible that more remarriages have been found for later periods because improvements in bureaucracy meant that marital status was more carefully registered.

As a number of remarriages were not found within the 'registered' marriages or contracts, it is interesting to consider why the registrations might not take place. Hunecke suggests that around 10% of marriages were not registered.<sup>14</sup> The numbers of additional marriages found within the *Cronica Matrimonia* were 16% of the total amount for the 1550s and 8% for the 1590s. Marriages had to be registered for children produced within them to be able to enter the *Maggior Consiglio* and one of the reasons why widows may not have registered their marriages is that the second marriage was not intended for the production of children. That this was a factor in some of the marriages found in the *Cronica Matrimonia*, is suggested because, of the 17 widows in the *Cronica Matrimonia* in the 1590s whose marriages had not been registered elsewhere, 10 married widowers. The age of the partners was likely to be higher and the production of children a lesser priority.

The archives of *Matrimoni Segreti* in the *Curia Patriarcale*, which include marriages made secretly and not usually registered by the *Avogaria di Comun* also offer some explanation as to why a widow, or anyone else, would choose not to register a marriage. Unfortunately these records only have thirteen examples pre-1650 so a sample has been taken of the decades 1660-60

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<sup>13</sup> Chapter 8 considers why a widow would, or would not, be noted as such within marriage registers and other documents.



and 1670-79 to see the average numbers of secret marriages being contracted and the incidence of remarriage within that sample.<sup>15</sup> The first one is noted in 1633 but before that there appear to be no records of this type of marriage, even though it is likely that secret marriages were still going ahead.<sup>16</sup> Of the secret marriages registered before 1650, three involved widows, suggesting that the proportion of remarriages registered secretly was at least as high as for the other marriages. For the 1660s there were forty seven secret marriages, of which six involved widows, more than 12%, and for the 1670s the percentage was even higher, with nine out of forty marriages involving widows, 22.5%. These figures are important for a number of reasons. Firstly because they suggest that there was still stigma attached to marrying a widow and that some widows concluded that such a marriage was better done secretly. For the widow with inheritance at stake a secret marriage could possibly circumnavigate some of the restrictions placed upon her, for example by her husband's will. Many of the secret marriage records for the 1670s actually give the reason why the participants wish the marriage to be kept secret. Although none of them specifically mention widowhood as a reason, fear of scandal is noted.<sup>17</sup> What this research has helped establish is that among the unregistered marriages which occurred in the period, there were a disproportionate number of widows.

The use of demographic methods to identify the numbers of women available to remarry does not always take into account more specific limitations upon those wishing to contract a second marriage. Comprehension of the legal restrictions placed upon remarrying widows allows a more considered understanding of the situation they faced. The most important of these restrictions related to whom the widow was allowed to marry. The normal boundaries of consanguinity applied but in addition the widow was restricted from marrying members of the first husband's family. Levirate marriage, that of the widow to the brother of her dead husband, was forbidden as early as 393 AD.<sup>18</sup> In Venice there is no indication that rules of consanguinity were any different to those in the rest of the Roman Catholic world, but there were instances where Papal dispensations were gained or regulations stretched.<sup>19</sup>

Consanguinity was not the only restriction to remarriage and there were other ways of preventing it. Most significant were the testamentary instructions of husbands who ordered their

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<sup>14</sup> V. Hunecke, 'Matrimonio e Demographia', p. 304.

<sup>15</sup> ACPV, Matrimoni Segreti B. 1, part I and II 1633-1678 and 1678-1688.

<sup>16</sup> Hunecke acknowledges that this is the case but his starting date of 1646 is wrong, as the first record was in fact for 1633. V. Hunecke, 'Matrimonio e Demographia', pp. 304-5.

<sup>17</sup> ACPV, Matrimoni Segreti B. 1, part II, p. 5. 1679, 30/09. For example the marriage of Santa Salvini and Giovanni Battista Dotto.

<sup>18</sup> J. Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage*, pp. 60-65.



wives not to remarry on pain of losing their inheritance, although Chojnacki views it as a sign of true love if the husband was prepared to let the wife find happiness in another marriage.<sup>20</sup> Such restrictions may have encouraged widows to marry secretly rather than not remarry at all, but it is really difficult to assess the impact wills had on the remarrying population as a whole.

Remarriage was considered second to the premier state of first marriage and was frowned upon, especially by the Church. Lower down the social scale, where the marriage had an economic function, a second marriage was more acceptable as a means of survival.<sup>21</sup> In France and the Dutch Republic, guardianship of children could be removed on remarriage and henceforth shared with male relatives, or granted to the new husband.<sup>22</sup> In Florence, allowing another man to raise sons of the lineage was unthinkable; it was more likely that guardianship would remain with the relatives of the first husband. The Florentine widow removing her dowry from the patrimony and marrying into another family was effectively taking from her children to give to her new husband but she could be faced with no alternative.<sup>23</sup> In Venice, while the same attitudes probably played a part in rulings on guardianship, the evidence of marriage contracts and wills suggest that it was not unusual for a mother to maintain contact with children, if not guardianship, when remarrying. This contrasts with the situation described by Klapisch-Zuber for Florence.

One way in which the Venetian widow was actually assisted to remarry was through her exemption from the dowry restrictions placed on everyone else (except heiresses).<sup>24</sup> In some of the contracts found for widows in the 1590s, the dowries were as much as three or four times the legal limit.<sup>25</sup> Strangely though, in the contracts found for the 1630s, widows, like everyone else, stuck to the legal limit of 6,000 ducats in registered contracts, with two contracts being made, one to hand to the *Avogaria di Comun* and one for private use.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A. Cowan, 'Love, Honour and the Avogaria di Comun', p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> S. Chojnacki, 'The Power of Love', p. 136.

<sup>21</sup> M. Ferro, *Dizionario*, section on 'Seconde Nozze'.

Romano suggests that "economic realities overcame cultural attitudes towards widowhood for it was in marriage that the artisan or labourer was more secure from the vagaries of life". D. Romano, *Patricians and Popolani*, p. 62.

<sup>22</sup> As Baulant notes for Paris in the early modern period. M. Baulant, 'The Scattered Family', p. 106.

<sup>23</sup> See C. Klapisch-Zuber, 'The "Cruel Mother"', pp. 118-131.

<sup>24</sup> ASV, Compilazione delle Legge, B. 186, p. 80. Section marked Cons. 1420, 22 Agosto, C. 160to.

<sup>25</sup> For just two examples of widows with large dowries see Andrianna Malipiero who had a dowry of 11,000 ducats in 1591. ASV AdC, Contratti di Nozze B. 113/3, n. 583 and Girolama Boldu who had an enormous dowry of 33,000 ducats in 1598. ASV AdC, Contratti di Nozze B. 114/4, n. 688.

<sup>26</sup> One example of this is found in the private archives of the Mocenigo family, where both copies of the marriage contract of Marieta da Lezze and Carlo Foscari can be compared. See ASV Archivio Privato, Archivio Mocenigo S. Stae, B. 48. The documents are not numbered.



Age was also one of the deciding factors in the likelihood of remarriage, which for both men and women under thirty was relatively common. Widowers continued to remarry until old age but for older women, the likelihood was greatly reduced.<sup>27</sup> The number and age of children surviving the first marriage also had an effect on the probability of remarriage. For widowers marriage was more frequent if they had dependents and for widows less so. Men with children were in need of a nanny but were reluctant to take on another man's children. The age of the children also had some effect and widows were at their least attractive as potential marriage partners when their children were young and yet when they themselves were most in need of assistance. By the time the children were older they were more attractive as they had no dependents but this fact was negated by the increased age of the widow. The one advantage that a widow with children could have in the eyes of a potential husband is that she had proved herself to be fertile. Occasionally it was possible for a woman with a child to remarry and take her child with her into the new marriage but this scenario was not common.

Economic reasons are those most frequently proffered for why a widow would want to remarry. Widowhood could mean a reduction in circumstances and, for some, remarriage was an escape from poverty, although by no means for all. For widows working in agriculture or in business, inherited from the dead husband, the need for replacement male labour is frequently cited as a reason for remarriage. Widows frequently lacked the guild membership and sometimes the skills required to continue running a craft business, and marriage to a journeyman could mean the business would continue, although it also meant that the widow lost her independent status as a businesswoman. Diefendorf has found that in sixteenth-century Paris, widows tended not to remarry within the same trade as their husband or father, however, which goes against the idea of remarriage as a means of replenishing labour.<sup>28</sup>

More generally remarriage has been regarded as a way for women to avoid the financial hardship naturally associated with life as widows. The difficulties of self-finance for the lone widow, particularly one with children, could encourage the search for a new husband although remarriage could turn out to be financially counter-productive. One way in which a husband could assist the widow financially was in the regaining of the dowry and Cowan points out that in Venice it took longer for the non-remarrying widow to get her dowry back.<sup>29</sup> But those

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<sup>27</sup> Bideau's study is particularly thorough in its analysis of this issue. A. Bideau, 'A Demographic and Social Analysis', pp. 28-43.

<sup>28</sup> B. Diefendorf, 'Widowhood and Remarriage', p. 388.

<sup>29</sup> A. Cowan, *The Urban Patriciate*, p. 141.



widows who had already regained their dowries, which could have increased since first marriage because of bequests, became an attractive marriage prospect.<sup>30</sup>

This study has concentrated more on the richer widows within Venetian society. The majority of them brought reasonable dowries to their marriages and often seem to have had the support of their natal families in remarriage, as can be seen by the numbers of fathers and brothers involved in the creation of second marriage contracts. Perhaps this group were less likely to remarry for financial reasons than many of the other widows in society. Relating to the question of the financial situation of the Venetian widow, it is interesting to note that the number of widows with marriage contracts seems to increase over the period, with 27 out of 59 widows having contracts in the 1590s, and all but 2 having them by the 1630s. There were probably a number of reasons for this, but it does seem to suggest that, as marriages were restricted and a small number of widows controlled increasingly larger amounts of material wealth, they were keen to see that it would be properly maintained in marriage. It could, of course, also be a reflection of increased bureaucracy and interest by the state in ensuring contracts were registered in order to make sure restrictions were enforced.

Aside from more practical reasons for remarriage, one of the most significant factors affecting the decision for the widow was family pressure. As late as the nineteenth century in some parts of Italy a widow had to convene a family council before remarrying.<sup>31</sup> Klapisch-Zuber suggests that it was not feasible for many widows to be independent and that the wealth they held meant that their families wanted to manipulate them for their own purposes.<sup>32</sup> Calvi notes that, in Florence, remarriage was frequently a cause of litigation with in-laws. Widows were more likely to face divided loyalties between old family and new, rather than to have no choice but to return to their natal families.<sup>33</sup> When the widow was offered family support rather than having pressure put upon her she was more able to look upon remarriage as a decision rather than a situation over which she had no control.

It is possible to get some idea of the role of family pressure on the remarrying widow in Venice through marriage contracts. No evidence has been found of widows being forced into marriages and the fact that, in many contracts, widows are at least present at the signing and sometimes the only signatory suggests that they were not being married off without their co-

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<sup>30</sup> A. Cowan, *The Urban Patriciate*, pp. 167-168.

<sup>31</sup> M. Palazzi, *Female Solitude*, p. 448.

<sup>32</sup> C. Klapisch-Zuber, 'The "Cruel Mother"', pp. 118-131.

<sup>33</sup> G. Calvi, 'Maddalena Nerli and Cosimo Tornabuoni', p. 334.



operation. Fewer than half the contracts were signed without the widow at least co-signing.<sup>34</sup> Most widows were aware of what was happening to them and in some cases were in complete control.<sup>35</sup> This suggests that Klapisch-Zuber's image of women as pawns manipulated by men does not wholly apply for Venice.

How far personal preference and 'choice' actually had a part in the decision to remarry and the choice of partner is an issue which has provoked much debate, not least because it is something which is almost impossible to calculate. Herlihy has suggested for fifteenth-century Florence that "widows remarried only reluctantly or with difficulty", while Brucker's view of the situation seems to be that widows could remarry if they wanted and that marriage brokers were willing and able to arrange such matches which went ahead with little censure from relatives and neighbours.<sup>36</sup> It is possible that both are giving an accurate picture of two different social groups. What needs to be taken into account is the experience of marriage had by a particular group of widows and the likelihood that that experience would have encouraged repetition.

The Boulton/Todd debate well demonstrates the issues surrounding female agency and remarriage, although their work is on England.<sup>37</sup> Boulton argues that many widows remarried rather than face the harsh patriarchal economy and explains figures showing decline in remarriage between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries as based on reduced opportunity and an increased ability for widows and spinsters to support themselves. To Boulton the reasons why a widow would remarry are demographic and economic.<sup>38</sup> Todd argues for opportunity and necessity but also for preference.<sup>39</sup> Although much has been written about the difficulties of being a single woman in this period, there is little literary evidence of a natural eagerness to remarry. While demographic historians have accepted that the rich widow might be reluctant to remarry, they have never contemplated that possibility for the poor. Todd has argued, however, that poor widows seeking security would in fact have had to be more choosy. Marriage was not a

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<sup>34</sup> See Chapter 2 for the sources used and Chapters 3 and 8 for discussion on the significance of who signed the marriage contract.

<sup>35</sup> For one example of a widow in control of her marriage contract see ASV Avogaria di Comun, Contratti di Nozze, B. 118/8, n. 1892, the contract of Lugretia Pasqualigo which notes that she is in a state of widowhood and as such is "libera patrona e dispostrice" of her dowry.

<sup>36</sup> D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*, p. 217.  
G. Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna*, pp. 90-93.

<sup>37</sup> J. Boulton, 'London Widowhood Revisited', pp. 323-357.

B. J. Todd, 'Demographic Determinism', pp. 421-450.

<sup>38</sup> Edwards has a similar view to Boulton suggesting that "Higher mortality levels, the absence of acceptable social welfare facilities and general economic necessity must have encouraged women in particular to remarry as soon as possible after the death of their husbands."

W. J. Edwards, 'Remarriage', p. 33.

<sup>39</sup> B. J. Todd, 'Demographic Determinism', p. 422.



relief from work but rather an addition to it.<sup>40</sup> Boulton accepts that poor relief would go some way to relieving economic need, but Todd has seen it as the supplement to earned income that allowed women to contemplate living alone.<sup>41</sup> That the remarriage rate fell in areas where economic factors and demography remained constant suggests that widowhood agency as a factor in remarriage cannot be ignored.

Some widows clearly responded to demographic and economic pressures in remarrying. Others to family encouragement, but views asserted from outside the immediate family may also have had some influence. In this period the Church's stance on remarriage was one of opposition. It did not forbid second marriages outright, but could refuse to give them benediction. In its view, marriage was a permanent institution and to take a second husband was tantamount to bigamy. On widowhood the woman had been given her second chance at sacred celibacy and she should enter a convent or at least live a chaste and quiet life within society. Remarriage was opposed because widows could be a useful source of income for the Church and also because, especially in rural areas, remarriage could upset the balance of land-holding and local power away from the church.

The issue of local balance was sometimes recognised by the community itself too. Burguière has shown that the phenomenon of the *Charivari* could be a reaction to changes in the matrimonial equilibrium of the community caused by remarriage.<sup>42</sup> These protests, which could include extortion of money from the couple marrying or even violence, were designed to remind the widow or widower of the dead spouse and to dissuade others from remarriage. Although the *Charivari* was almost entirely a rural phenomenon, common in areas of small communities where the number of suitable marriage partners was small, and not particularly widespread, it does give an indication of the passions the issue of remarriage could raise within the community. There is no evidence of such a phenomenon in Venice but haste of remarriage could be met with public disapproval.

The image of the remarrying widow presented by literature was often designed to turn opinion against her. Arden notes that in French literature the widow is "intensely grieving yet easily consoled".<sup>43</sup> Writers did not deny the sincerity of the grief but criticised the ease with which it was overcome. Carlton has similarly considered the picture of the remarrying widow

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<sup>40</sup> Lawrence gives an interesting insight into the amount of tasks expected of a woman within the marital home. A. Lawrence, *Women in England*, pp. 110-115.

<sup>41</sup> J. Boulton, 'London Widowhood Revisited', p. 326.

B. J. Todd, 'Demographic Determinism', p. 428.

<sup>42</sup> A. Burguière, 'The Charivari', p. 100.

<sup>43</sup> H. M. Arden, 'Grief, Widowhood and Women's Sexuality', p. 305.



portrayed by English literature.<sup>44</sup> To English writers, the remarrying widow was an affront to men. She had beaten her husband in the game of life and by remarrying was exploiting male mortality. By exaggerating the reality of the remarrying widow, writers were holding her up for moral criticism and ridicule, and yet even within this stereotypical image there was ambiguity. Men should be discouraged from becoming attached to this sexually and financially attractive, yet morally repulsive woman, but at the same time the widow needed to be kept under male control, so she could not lure other men, neglect her children, fritter their fortune or show disrespect for her dead spouse. All these male fears were projected onto the image of the remarrying widow.

Prescriptive literature used other means to consider the position of the remarrying widow, by offering advice on comportment rather than being directly judgmental, although it offers only the opinions of a small minority of literate male society.<sup>45,46</sup> That it was better to abstain from remarriage is a common theme in these works and also in those written by women, who see advantages in being free from the authority of a husband. Juan Luis Vives, in his work of 1523, is vehement in his admonishment against remarriage saying that, whatever the financial need of the young widow, to remarry is to bring an enemy into the home of her children and, if a young woman has to remarry, her husband should be old and sober. Vives stresses the importance of remembering the dead husband and says that “a good wydowe ought to suppose that her husband is not utterly deade”, living but absent. Francesco Barbaro wrote on remarriage within the context of marriage and maintains that if a woman truly loves her husband then she should mourn for him and refuse to remarry.<sup>47</sup>

Giulio Cesare Cabei, a Ferrarese, who published his work in Venice, directs the advice in Chapter Three of his book to the conservation of the state of widowhood.<sup>48</sup> He stresses the importance of chastity to the widow who should live as if she had been offered a second virginity.<sup>49</sup> St Ambrose, Cabei recalls, did not prohibit second marriage, but just because something is permitted it does not mean that it is good. Those who conserve their state of widowhood and refuse every opportunity to remarry are more highly revered. If the poor widow needs assistance she has God to turn to, and contempt from her servants, daily reduction in

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<sup>44</sup> C. Carlton, ‘The Widow’s Tale’, pp. 118-129.

<sup>45</sup> F. Barbaro (trans. B. G. Kohl), ‘On Wifely Duties’, pp. 179-228.

G. C. Cabei, *Ornamenti*.

<sup>46</sup> J. L. Vives, *A Very Fruteful and Pleasant Boke*.

<sup>47</sup> F. Barbaro, ‘On Wifely Duties’, pp. 200-201.

<sup>48</sup> G. C. Cabei, *Ornamenti*, pp. 16-27.

<sup>49</sup> G. C. Cabei, *Ornamenti*, p. 17.



resources and fear of being defrauded should not be enough to drive the widow to abandon her chastity which is prized above everything in the world. Cabei also considers the implications of remarriage more practically, discussing the problems of having children from two marriages and the difficulties of being a stepmother.<sup>50</sup> Frequent quotation from the bible is intended to show the widow how much God prefers the chaste widow. Cabei also warns that attempts to replicate happiness of the first marriage will not succeed, quoting the case of a woman who took twenty two husbands before finally being outlived by the ultimate, and victorious one. Although Cabei does not really advocate anything new for the widow, continuing traditional lines of argument about chastity and fidelity, the way in which he communicates his message makes it seem more as though it is intended for the ears of the widow, as it suggests by the dedication. He shows why it was in the widow's interest not to remarry.

Moderata Fonte's work expresses the disadvantages of remarriage for an intelligent and wealthy woman.<sup>51</sup> In her tale of six Venetian women, Leonora, a young widow determined never to remarry says of remarriage:

I'd rather drown than submit again to a man! I have just escaped from servitude and suffering and you're asking me to go back again of my own free will and get tangled up in all that again? God preserve me!<sup>52</sup>

The women, in their discussion of marriage, maintain that a woman could live like a queen on her dowry and when she marries "she becomes a slave, and loses her liberty and, along with her liberty, her control over her own property".<sup>53</sup> This being the case, why would any widow, who by law should have her dowry back, want to remarry? Some advantages of remarriage are recognised, however, and Andriana, the older widow, urges Leonora to find

a worthy and charming companion for herself, with whom she can lead a long and happy life - if only to avoid the risk of giving occasion for malicious gossip and slander.<sup>54</sup>

Fonte articulates some of the reservations held by widows about remarriage and backs the arguments of Todd and others, who perceive space for female agency within the remarriage process.

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<sup>50</sup> G. C. Cabei, *Ornamenti*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>51</sup> M. Fonte, *The Worth of Women*.

<sup>52</sup> M. Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, p. 53.

<sup>53</sup> M. Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, p. 113.

<sup>54</sup> M. Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, p. 259.



This research, then, has helped raise to prominence the important issues in the study of remarriage within the Venetian field. It has shown that, unexpectedly, the number of remarriages did not decrease significantly in a period when first marriages were on the decline and suggests that the opinions of the church and prescriptive writers were having little effect on those women in a position to remarry. Looking at comparable locations, it seems from the figures given that Venice was reasonably in line with the 10% to 15% of marriages as remarriages suggested for elsewhere. We cannot make comparison with the age-specific figures offered for Florence or with figures where remarriage as a whole rather than female remarriage alone is considered, but nevertheless, the indications are that Venice was not particularly unusual, at least in terms of remarriage rates. That Venice differed from Florence in the involvement of widows in the creation of marriage contracts is clear and the literary evidence offered by Fonte, gives an indication that female agency played its part within the marriage market of the Venetian patriciate. Venetian widows were not purely pawns manipulated by law, demography and circumstance.

Perhaps one of the most interesting questions which has arisen from this study is that relating to the registration or not of marriages and the frequency with which non-registered marriage seem to involve widows. This research has gone some way towards answering the questions raised but this is an area which would benefit from some more concentrated study. Addressing the debate over desire or reluctance to remarry, Venice can offer evidence from some contracts showing that many of the wealthy widows remarrying were only prepared to do so on their own terms.

What this chapter on remarriage adds to the thesis as a whole is an insight into one of the opportunities for a woman and an indication of the way wealthy Venetian widows went about organising their own business. It adds weight to the idea that, while status, finance and family could influence the choices a widow made, they were not the only determining factors in the decision to remarry. While some widows in early modern Venice may have been the pawns of their families, or forced into remarriage through poverty, and others were unwilling to remarry because they had the means to support themselves, this research shows that some intelligent, wealthy women were in control of their marital fate after the death of their first husband and that they were choosing to take second husbands.



## The Ideal Widow - Images of the widow from literary and visual sources – Chapter 7

### Introduction.

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the image of the Venetian widow from the perspective of contemporary writers. There are certainly recognised problems with the use of literary and visual materials, but sources of this type, particularly prescriptive writings, have been used successfully by other historians to expound ideas about the social situation in Venice.<sup>1</sup> I hope to follow their example. There is a need to look at widowhood from another direction, to recreate a more visual and personal picture, and these sources increase the possibility of this.

The chapter will follow themes, looking at the various viewpoints from which contemporaries viewed the widow. Prescriptive literature, almost exclusively a male preserve of production, is the starting point, with the aim being to demonstrate how the bulk of contemporary written opinion felt the widow should behave. The work of Giulio Cesare Cabei, *Ornamenti della Gentildonna Vedova* (1574), is an exceptional source for this thesis, offering advice to the widow about behaviour from the standpoint of someone who, if not Venetian, at least had connection with the city.

Secondly the chapter will move on to consider what the ideal life of the widow would have been from a female point of view. There were a number of Venetian ‘feminist’ writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the tradition of such writing will be considered briefly before an examination of what they have to say about widows. The most important source here is the work of Moderata Fonte, whose *Worth of Women*, published in 1600, counts two widows among its seven main characters. Fonte’s view contradicts the male, prescriptive definition of the ideal widow to some extent, while expounding other opinions about female behaviour which conform to that ‘ideal’.

The third section of this chapter will look at the stereotypical widow as found in contemporary literature. While fewer examples have been found of this woman in Venice than can be seen in the writings of Shakespeare for example, what has been found presents an image which corresponds with a more widely distributed stereotype. Shakespeare himself wrote about Venice of course, but unfortunately his most famous widows are found elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Cox, Margaret King and Margaret Rosenthal have all used prescriptive literature, and humanists’ writings along with more familiar historical sources to help illuminate the social situation in Renaissance and early modern Venice.

V. Cox, ‘The Single Self’, pp. 513-558.

M. L. King, ‘Caldiera and the Barbaros’, pp. 19-50.

M. F. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*.



Finally, discussion will consider the role of visual images in determining the person of the widow in early modern Venice. Costume literature offers many examples of how noble widows dressed and shows how their mourning attire corresponded with the dress of other groups of society. The causes and effects of sumptuary legislation and the prescriptive, or descriptive nature of costume literature will be considered, as well as images of the widow found elsewhere. While widows, and women in general, were not that frequently the subjects of portraits in this period, enough survive to offer some information about the portrayal of widows.

This chapter is therefore an examination of stereotypes: that of the ideal widow described by prescriptive writers, that of the 'feminist' writers, that created by plays and fiction, and that seen in images. We need to confront the problems of using such sources, examining carefully what kind of information they can really offer us, and then we must also consider how far any of the images within them hold true for what we know about the Venetian widow.

### **The Ideal Widow**

The background to much of the prescriptive writing in early modern Venice is found in legal and religious literature. Widows were affected by most laws directed at women in general, but at the same time they had greater independence than other women because they were not under the control of husbands. The way in which the physical person of the widow was most affected by laws was through sumptuary legislation, of which there was much in Venice from the fourteenth century onwards.<sup>2</sup> This attempted to regulate dress and other consumption, restricting of numbers who could be entertained at wedding feasts for example. Widows were affected most directly by those laws which restricted mourning dress and funeral activities, but also by other legislation on women's clothing.

There were a number of reasons for the creation of sumptuary legislation, which was first found in Genoa in the thirteenth century, and proliferated in Venice by the fifteenth century. For trading cities, economic motives, the fears of capital being wasted in expensive clothing, rather than invested in trade, were important. There were also more moral reasons, especially as Venetian woman had a reputation for display. Hughes notes that in 1562 a law was enacted regulating that the front of the breast had to be covered, suggesting that Venetian women did not always adopt the modesty advocated by the prescriptive writers.<sup>3</sup> The increase in sumptuary

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 3 for more details on widows and sumptuary legislation.

See M. Newett, 'The Sumptuary Laws of Venice' for a general discussion about the nature of sumptuary legislation.

<sup>3</sup> D. Owen Hughes, 'Sumptuary Laws', p. 84.



legislation by the sixteenth century was a sign that the political establishment was adopting the Church's views on the need to restrain seductive dressing. Morality and economics therefore both had a role, but there was also the more misogynistic reason for curbing the consumption of women specifically. Married women, with increasing amounts of dowry wealth, were spending large sums on display. Legislating against clothing was one way of controlling that spending. The restrictions on mourning dress had the purpose of controlling the actions of those widows with money who were now outside the control of even a husband. The patrician legislators had an image in mind of how the dutiful, respectful widow should dress and set about enforcing that image.

In addition to opinions about how women, and the widow should dress, the Church also had more far-reaching ideas about the behaviour of the ideal widow. Biblical examples did not always conform completely to later standards, but much of the advice offered to widows by St Paul is reflected in later church opinions.<sup>4</sup> Patriotic writers of the Counter Reformation in particular focused on New Testament writing because those women portrayed in the Old Testaments were, of course, Jews. Canon law began in the twelfth century with the provision made that marriage was permanent. The Catholic Church would not give benediction to a second marriage not because it was wicked *per se* but because the first Benediction was seen to be perpetual. It did not have the power to punish those who married twice but the ideal widow would not remarry. She was regarded as a person deserving of protection through Christian charity and it was better that she rely on that rather than forsake her sacred celibacy. The Council of Trent concluded that, although marriage was superior to most modes of living, it was inferior to chastity and the service of the Church.<sup>5</sup> Widows could never achieve that perfect state of virginity, but they could atone for the loss of it by maintaining celibacy for the remainder of their lives. Widows were certainly found in convents but also, in Venice, in the tertiary orders and in *Ospedali* and *Ospizi*, some of which were created for the specific purpose of housing those widows not remarrying and in need of charity.<sup>6</sup>

The religious legislators tried to restrict the numbers of widows trying to remarry by tightening control over the marriage legislation. This was seen in Venice through the

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<sup>4</sup> Ruth, in the Old Testament, did not conform to the Counter Reformation ideal of widowhood because, although she was a dutiful daughter, she remarried. See Old Testament, Ruth 1-4. St Paul offered this advice; "Now, to the unmarried and to the widows I say that it would be better for you to continue to live alone, as I do. But if you cannot restrain your desire, go ahead and marry - it is better to marry than to burn with passion". I Corinthians 7 v. 8-9. Other more detailed advice to widows is found in I Timothy 5 v. 3-16.

<sup>5</sup> Canon 10 of Session 24. See H. J. Schroeder, *The Canons and Decrees*, p. 182.



establishment of the *Examinum Matrimoniorum*, a court which demanded that some widows prove the death of their husbands before they were permitted to remarry.<sup>7</sup> Without actually banning remarriage the Church was doing all it could to encourage widows into the religious, celibate ideal life that it advocated.

There was a strong tradition of writing about the family and marriage within secular prescriptive writing by the early modern period and some of it is particularly relevant to a discussion of widowhood. Looking first at the general trend of writings in Italy, and at the work by Juan Luis Vives on widowhood, the chapter will then move on to consider the works of Venetians Francesco Barbaro and Stefano Guazzo. The main focus of this discussion of prescriptive writing, however, will be the work of Giulio Cesare Cabei.

By the fifteenth century, both Venetian and non-Venetian humanists had begun to take an interest in writing about the family, concerned with marriage, children and administration of the household. In Florence, Leon Battista Alberti's *I Libri della Famiglia*, written in the 1430s, copied by hand and read widely, although not printed until the eighteenth century, is a very important example of Renaissance treatises on the family.<sup>8</sup> He looks at paternity, marriage, the material basis for family prosperity and at external relationships as well. Outside Italy, Christine de Pizan wrote for women more specifically. In the *Livres des Trois Virtus*, using an allegorical style, she advises on the proper way for a noble woman to mourn, and on the customs of behaviour appropriate to the widow.<sup>9</sup> She suggests that women should know how to run a household and uses the character Prudence to warn them to guard against moral perils.

In 1523, Juan Luis Vives wrote *A Very Fruteful and Pleasant Boke Called The Instruction of a Christian Woman*,<sup>10</sup> and, with seven chapters given over to the widow, she was clearly a subject he felt worthy of attention. Within this work, Vives' first concern is for the loss the widow had suffered. Advice on mourning is practical. The widow should mourn her husband "defender of her chastity... father and tutor of her children, wealth of her household"; but she should be comforted by the immortality of his soul.<sup>11</sup> Having consoled the widow, Vives then moves on to discuss the practical arrangements for the funeral, which was as much for the benefit

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 5 for more information about widows in convents, third orders and *Ospizi*.

<sup>7</sup> The first records of the *Examinum Matrimoniorum* date from 1593 and by the early seventeenth century there are many cases involving widows.

<sup>8</sup> L. B. Alberti, *The Family*.

<sup>9</sup> For more details on Pizan's work see L. Dulac (trans. Thelma Fenster), 'Mystical Inspiration and Political Knowledge'.

<sup>10</sup> J. L. Vives (trans. R. Hyrd), *A Very Fruteful and Pleasant Boke*, N.B. The pages within the facsimile copy of this treatises are not numbered. Any pages quoted from will be numbered as if counted from the beginning of section three, that which applies to widows.



of those remaining as for the departed. In line with sumptuary legislation of his day, he encourages thrift with the arrangements, so that testamentary payments may be made and debts fulfilled. In the third chapter he turns the widow's attention back to her husband. Corresponding with the teaching of the Church, he encourages the widow to think of her husband as still alive but just absent. She should continue to live to please him and remember him with reverence. A second marriage would be like marrying the devil. It would devalue the memory of her husband and keep her from spending time in prayer. God will praise those living in virtue.

In Vives' advice on widowhood, we see the themes appearing which were apparent in religious writings and which were almost a constant in literature relating to widows. The first theme was the need to mourn, but not excessively. Secondly the memory of the dead husband should be honoured. Thirdly the widow from then on should dress and behave chastely in case she tempted another man into marriage. The requirement that the widow should not remarry was the fourth theme. From this rejection of remarriage stems almost all other advice. She must not remarry, as it would devalue the name of her first husband; it would put her children at risk, it would put her soul at risk, it would put her household at risk. The widow must have enough practical knowledge to be able to live without a second husband, but must not behave so independently that her reputation is put at risk in another way.

This work is an excellent example of the type of advice which was being offered to widows, by men, about conduct and behaviour. Although not of Italian origin, it is covered in detail here because it sets out clearly the themes which were to be found repeated in Venetian material. Using Vives as a benchmark for advice to widows, we can see how other writers thought along similar lines. There are a number of reasons why these themes are repeated over and over again. Moral objections to remarriage and desire that widows adopt a religious life were important, but male pride also had a part to play in advice against remarriage. Men did not like to think that they could be easily replaced. A genuine concern for the state of the family and the marriage market was another prompt for such advice. Vives notes that remarriage could be damaging to existing children, and stepfamilies undoubtedly faced problems.<sup>12</sup> In other places the marriage market was unstable, or so slow moving that the introduction of widows as potential partners could upset a delicate balance. A further reason for writing could have been a genuine belief that the advice offered was for the benefit of the widow. While the advice offered by

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<sup>11</sup> J. L. Vives, *A Very Fruteful and Pleasant Boke*, fourth page of section three.

<sup>12</sup> J. L. Vives, *A Very Fruteful and Pleasant Boke*, 30th and 31st pages.



prescriptive writers did not vary a great deal from the early sixteenth to late seventeenth centuries, their reasons for writing were not always alike.

Margaret King has looked at the variety of ways in which the family was approached in the writing of the Venetian humanists and has noted that on the whole, they were less concerned about the welfare of individuals than about the noble family as an entity in itself.<sup>13</sup> Giovanni Caldiera's concerns were about how the family and the individual should relate to the state, and Ermolao Barbaro concluded that, while the political life was not for him, domestic life was part of duty to the state. Francesco Barbaro, however, did offer advice relevant to widows, perhaps due to the fact that he was raised by his widowed mother. In his 1415 work *De Re Uxoriam*, the advice he offered as a wedding present to Lorenzo and Genevra Cavalcanti, stressed the benefit of procreation to the state, but also the companionship element to marriage.<sup>14</sup> His section of advice which specifically refers to widows is along the already noted theme of the rejection of remarriage. He suggests that conjugal love is seen in the wife's obedience to her husband, in great mourning on his death and in a refusal to remarry.<sup>15</sup>

Stefano Guazzo's *La Civile Conversazione* offers advice on the conduct of widows, but specifically on modes of speech.<sup>16</sup> Guazzo's views of widows as potential marriage partners correspond with that of the church. He says;

Ma ritornando al nostro principal ragionamento,  
conchiuderemo ch'egli è meglio sposar una  
vergine ch'una vedova.<sup>17</sup>

He also offers advice on how the widow should speak and behave, suggesting that even the most modest widow is still at the mercy of the tongues which gossip. Their behaviour should be so exemplary as to blunt the arrow of slander, fasting in the presence of luxury, being watchful and virtuous.<sup>18</sup>

The main source of prescriptive information on widowhood in early modern Venice to be used in this thesis is the work of Giulio Cesare Cabei.<sup>19</sup> Son of a medical doctor, he was a doctor

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<sup>13</sup> M. L. King, 'Caldiera and the Barbaros', pp. 45-46.

<sup>14</sup> F. Barbaro, *De Re Uxoriam*, pp. 179- 227.

<sup>15</sup> F. Barbaro, *De Re Uxoriam*, pp. 200-201.

<sup>16</sup> S. Guazzo, *La Civile Conversazione*.

<sup>17</sup> S. Guazzo, *La Civile Conversazione*, pp. 192. (section 3 A38b). 'But returning to our principal argument, we conclude that it is better to marry a virgin than a widow'.

<sup>18</sup> S. Guazzo, *La Civile Conversazione*, p. 241. (sections 3 A172 a, b and c).

<sup>19</sup> While I am aware of Ludovico Dolce's *Ammaestramenti Pregiatissimi...* I decided to concentrate on Cabei's work because I was only able to find passing references to it in secondary material and felt it worthy of detailed consideration, whereas Dolce's work has been used as a historical source in the past. G. Calvi, 'Reconstructing the Family', p, 278.



of law from Ferrara, attached to the university. He followed his father to Venice to make his fortune, finishing his life in Conegliano where he died in 1622. He published four books of verse and other works including *Ornamenti della Gentildonna Vedova* in 1574 when he was still a young man.<sup>20</sup> This work, unlike many others offering advice on the family, is not in the form of dialogue, but that of a conduct manual aiming to illuminate, “all the things necessary to the state of widowhood”.<sup>21</sup>

*Ornamenti* is dedicated “with privilege” to the Illustrissima Signora Ginevra Salviati de’ Baglioni and the importance of her to the work as a whole should not be underestimated. Although she was not a Venetian noble, she was of the highest ranks of society, possibly from his native Ferrara. Cabei paid great tribute to this noble lady, both in the dedication and in every chapter. She was wise and virtuous, a wonder, a marvel and he praises the “clear river of her rare eloquence”.<sup>22</sup> By making use of such an example, who, he also noted, was related to Margherita Queen of France, he was showing that his ideal of widowhood was an achievable goal. She was exemplary, but others could emulate her model. Also, such a work was a perfect method of flattery towards a generous and important patron, in itself demonstrating that widows could gain positions which were deserving of such attention. Cabei noted that many of his previous works had been dedicated to great men of Italy. We must be aware of Cabei’s motives when considering the text itself, but the fact that much of the advice offered follows the traditions of that seen elsewhere suggests that it was not only aimed to impress. The Signora was so well versed in correct behaviour anyway that Cabei’s work would have been wasted on her alone. It seems that his intended audience was female, and literate, the noble women of Venice and also women from outside the Veneto.

Cabei’s advice in *Ornamenti* is divided into fifteen chapters and by looking at each of these individually we can examine the details of the advice offered and consider the traditions and motives behind it.<sup>23</sup> Cabei begins, as did Vives before him, with a discussion of the love

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<sup>20</sup> All bibliographical material is taken from Luigi Ughi, *Dizionario Storico*, p. 120. Information about Cabei can also be found in Antonio Orsino, *Cenni Biografici degli Illustri Centesi*, Lanzoni-Soffriti, Cento, 1880, p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> The title page notes that the whole title is:

*Ornamenti della Gentildonna Vedova  
opera del Signor Giulio Cesare Cabei  
Nella quale ordinatamente si tratta di tutte le cose  
necessarie allo stato vedovile; onde potra farsi adono  
d'ono habito virtuoso, e honorato.*

G. C. Cabei, *Ornamenti*, Title page.

<sup>22</sup> G. C. Cabei, *Ornamenti*, Dedication page.

<sup>23</sup> The chapters in G. C. Cabei, *Ornamenti*, are arranged thus:



between husband and wife and the grief which follows the death of a spouse. Grief of this kind is infinite but widows should remember that God will conserve them and offer them consolation, if they can demonstrate the strength of their spirits. Signora Salviati should console herself as she is the true example of the sage and chaste widow. The second chapter continues to emphasise the patience and hope that the grieving widow should have. There are personal benefits for the trials suffered, and there is no need for the widow to be disconsolate eternally, as God has not abandoned her husband, and she has lost only his body. Cabei advises that the widow pray to the Saints as help is at hand when necessary. Jesus raised the widow's son and sincere faith will lead to a healing of the spirit.<sup>24</sup>

The third chapter of Cabei's work returns to the now familiar theme of conservation of widowhood. The widow should believe that no virtue pleases God as much as chastity and

viver semper nella virtù della sempre lodevole continenza,  
la quale è una seconda virginità, degna di grandissimo merito;  
e perche tanta virtù non può esser donate da altri, che dal grande  
Iddio.<sup>25</sup>

Cabei recognises the circumstances which led widows to consider remarriage; reduction in material position, disrespect from servants, ill treatment by the government. Yet he warns that remarriage may cause as many problems itself, with damage to the position of existing children and the loss of prized celibacy. Cabei does not deny that women marry a second time for very

Chapter I	Dell'amore fra marito e moglie, e del dolore per la morte d'alcuno d'essi.	p. 1-10
Chapter II	Della pazienza, che deve haver la vedova.	p. 10-16
Chapter III	Che la vedova si deve conservare nello stato vedovile.	p. 16-28
Chapter IV	Di alcune cose, che nella vedova si ricercano.	p. 28-35
Chapter V	Delle vesti convenienti alla vedova.	p. 35-41
Chapter VI	Della modestia, che si conviene alla vedova in alcune cose particolarmente.	p. 41-50
Chapter VII	Della conversazione della vedova.	p. 50-57
Chapter VIII	Che la vedova non vadi a conviti.	p. 57-63
Chapter IX	Dell'humilita della vedova.	p. 63-71
Chapter X	Della charita della vedova.	p. 71-80
Chapter XI	Del digiuno della vedova.	p. 80-86
Chapter XII	Dell'oration della vedova.	p. 86-96
Chapter XIII	Delle sacre lettioni, che si convengono alla vedova.	p. 96-105
Chapter XIV	Del governo della casa, che si conviene alla vedova.	p. 105-115
Chapter XV	Della cura che deve haver la vedova de I figliuoli.	p. 115-133

<sup>24</sup> New Testament, Luke 7.  
<sup>25</sup> G. C. Cabei, *Ornamenti*, p. 17. "Widows should live in the virtue of the most praiseworthy continence, which is a second virginity, a dignity of great merit, and this great virtue cannot be given to any other than God".



valid reasons but still urges against it. While this is a much-repeated topic of prescriptive advice to widows, Cabei handles it in a way which emphasises the practical arguments, as well as the moral ones, appearing to have a good grasp of the motivations behind remarriage.

Once the widow has made the decision not to remarry, she has to prepare herself, and look after her chastity and integrity which are necessary to enter heaven, being modest for her dead husband but also for her eternal one. Bodily chastity is not sufficient; virtue is necessary in all things. Cabei's ideal widow will virtuously raise her children, console the sick, do good works, pray and be attentive to divine contemplation.

Modesty is an important theme for Cabei and one which is seen in writings on every sort of woman at the time. Modesty was a key virtue for the young girl and the wife, as well as the widow. Its importance is evident in bequests, where modesty could be the condition of a legacy, and in court cases, where modesty was a sign that the woman was honest, trustworthy and of good moral standing. One of the ways in which a widow can maintain modesty and a virtuous life, according to Cabei, is through her dress and Chapter V recognises that, while the spirit is immortal, it is the mortal body which is corruptible. The spirit should be dressed in virtuous habit, and the body should be covered, not for beauty but for modesty. Vanity encourages errors of judgement. "Deve l'honestà vedova fuggire mille bigliamenti e mille vanite".<sup>26</sup> She should wear brown or black, and without ornament, because such colours guard against lustful men and help extinguish her own flame. White is the colour for chaste thoughts and a sign of the repudiation of all things earthly.

The young widow must show restraint with her eyes too, the part of the body in which all major ills are born. She could attract flocks of immodest young men if she is not careful. Laughter also desires modesty, yet it is not unusual to laugh even when sad. If her eyes are still serious then the widow will be free from every censure. Modesty is further required in words, as the tongue is an instrument of great ruin. The widow's gestures should show humility and her voice should not be hard or elevated but smooth and pleasant. She must beware of three things; firstly the quantity of words, the fewer said, the less opportunities there are to make a mistake. Secondly, all things have their own time, and the widow should not interrupt or answer immediately when questioned. Thirdly the widow should be careful about to whom she speaks.

Conversation is also the topic of Chapter VII because Cabei realises that people's opinions often rest on conversations. Sainly conversation confounds the enemy, and sincerity

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<sup>26</sup> G. C. Cabei, *Ornamenti*, p. 38. "The honest widow must put away one thousand dresses and one thousand vanities".



and faith gain the upper hand. Cabei is concerned that the widow be always in a position where there is someone to back her up. He recognises that it can be only a word or a glance which ruin a reputation, or the company of people making the wrong conversation.

la nostra vedova ha da fuggire la pratica di tutte quelle persone, che potessero un sol punto denigrare la sua candida honestà.<sup>27</sup>

He shows concern for the widow, rather than the desire to make demands of her based on the morality of men. Cabei's patron is to be praised for the nature of her conversation, and she is well versed in philosophy. He does not object, as some of his time did, to the education, at least to a limited level, of women.

Chapters VII to XI are all concerned with more theoretical matters. Virtuous and saintly works should be all that the widow desires, and she is warned against drinking too much, and encouraging her libido which takes energy from hot food. Abstinence, in all things, is good. Temperance is a virtue. Yet, however virtuous, the widow should still be humble, with eyes fixed on the ground, curiosity tempered. Cabei divides humility into twelve grades, all interconnected. Humility is shown in a quiet laugh and voice, in taciturnity, and in refraining from arrogance. It is seen in confessions of unworthiness, in obedience and patience, in hard work and in fear of God. This ladder of grades of humility is helping the widow to climb to heaven.

It is normally the widow herself who is regarded as a worthy recipient of charity, but, in this advice to noble widows, Cabei suggests that assistance to fellow men is alongside what widows owe to God. The tale of the Widow's Mite is a sign that all can give spiritual and corporal gifts and he shows seven ways in which widows can offer charity.<sup>28</sup> Widows can teach those requiring instruction, counsel and console, help brothers reprehend the errant, support the infirm and even give orations of the Lord for the benefit of others. This advice is particularly interesting because it suggests that widows should take a proactive role. They should not just sit at home and quietly contemplate, they should be actively seeking to help others.

Cabei does not suggest, as the Church and other contemporaries often did, that widows should enter a convent to maintain their chaste position, but he does consider different ways in which the widow could prepare herself for heaven. Humility, charity and abstinence have all been considered above, but in Chapter XI he goes into more detail about the virtues of fasting. It clears the mind for the contemplation of God, subjecting the body to the mind. The body should

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<sup>27</sup> G. C. Cabei, *Ornamenti*, p. 54. "Our widow must avoid familiarity with all those people who could denigrate her candid honesty".

<sup>28</sup> New Testament - Luke 21.



be deprived of food, the ears of gossip, the eyes of curiosity, the tongue of mumblings, the hands of unjust deeds and the spirits of vain thoughts and one's own will. The Signora, of course, is to be praised for her fasting.

Oration as a form of prayer is the last action that the widow can fulfil to assist her in the celestial life. Widows should pray for others, and themselves, and recognise that God gives what is good rather than what is asked for. Orations should be held out to God so that he can decide and even enemies should be included in these. This is service to God through the spirit rather than the body, and will provide the widow with the strength and virtue to carry out so many of the other obligations of a truly good widowhood.

Dovrebbe sempre la sconsolata vedova esser occupata nell'oration, per ottener in parte almeno la liberatione de molti travagli.<sup>29</sup>

In the final three chapters of his work, Cabei returns to more practical advice, firstly about how sacred literature can be of assistance to the widow, particularly the young widow. Again he is encouraging the widow to take action on her own behalf, to look in the scriptures for those words that will help clothe the spirit. On this occasion he does make exceptions for the fact that the widow is a woman; she should read the lives of Mary and the Saints. In Chapter XIII Cabei seems briefly to enter the 'querelle des dames', the discussion of female equality, which was going on at the time. He talks about Isotta Nogarola, who had a doctorate in philosophy and also about Costanza Varano, the very learned wife of Alessandro Sforza. He warns that writing women can be censured but does not censure them himself. He is not suggesting that all should be educated, but that it is acceptable for a woman to be educated if she acts with sufficient modesty.

The temporal needs of the widow are considered in the penultimate chapter, which is concerned with governing the household. Although the woman may well have been involved in household administration before the death of her husband, she now has to learn to be a prudent negotiator. She cannot be too proud nor yet too timid. The running of the household by women is something which Alberti considered in great detail, and is a theme which has occupied many other writers on the family.<sup>30</sup> How a household was managed was regarded as a reflection on the

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<sup>29</sup> G. C. Cabei, *Ornamenti*, p. 95. "The disconsolate widows should always be occupied in oration to obtain in part at least, the liberation from many sufferings".

<sup>30</sup> L. B. Alberti, *I Libri*, pp. 221-229. Alberti considers, through the character of Giannozzo, how a wife should be instructed to run a household. If she is as well instructed as he suggests, within her husband's lifestyle, then the running of the household after his death should pose few problems. Francesco Barbaro also comments on the need for a well-run household, with orderly servants. F. Barbaro, *De Re Uxoribus*, pp. 215-220.



state of the family, and control of servants was a primary concern; they should know their place and be well instructed so they work hard. Scandal should be avoided even inside the household: female servants need also to be chaste. Widows are also to be warned about legitimate acquisition of goods for the house, about the honesty of their agents, and the conservation of the fruits of labour. Decoration should be done with dignity, but superfluity will be censured. While Cabei does not suggest what is superfluous, he awakens the 'naive' widow to the dangers of sole household responsibility.

The final chapter of *Ornamenti*, concerning a widow's care for her children can perhaps be regarded as the most crucial. Chojnacki notes that motherhood was a woman's most serious duty and this was doubly so when the children had no father.<sup>31</sup> The widow had to have both care and governance. She should teach her children about spiritual things, but must learn herself in order that she might teach. She must be an example, and mix with appropriate company, guarding nubile daughters, and marrying them legitimately or, better, making them brides of Christ. The widow should take the counsel of family and friends about girls and be even more careful in the instruction of sons. Discipline is essential and the mother should elect a suitable master and teach her sons to honour the house by their behaviour. Cabei's final advice is that overall happiness should not operate against virtue. Widows should show their own prudence in the instruction of those children they care for, as even children without an earthly father have the benefit of their heavenly father, and the mother can bring her children close to him through her diligent and careful teaching.

While this may appear an unnecessarily long expansion of the advice expounded by Cabei in *Ornamenti*, as this work is the only one published in Venice whose advice is directed at those widows who have been the subjects of the rest of this thesis, it is important that the work is covered thoroughly. Cabei, with his noble female audience in mind, has tried to clearly examine all the most important aspects of the widow's life. He has endeavoured to advise them on spirituality, and practical issues, emphasising not only the morality, and benefits to children and the defunct, but also to the widow herself. It is perhaps a reflection of his position as a lawyer that he was particularly aware of all the pitfalls a widow could face. Advice on modesty had the practical value of making the widow more credible and respectable. Advice on household management helped widows to avoid difficult situations of which he perhaps had personal

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In Venice noble women were frequently to be found in control of households with husbands who were absent for months at a time on trade.

<sup>31</sup> S. Chojnacki, "The Most Serious Duty", pp. 133-154.



experience. While the work has only a limited amount to tell us about the reality of the widow's life in Venice, when compared with what we already know, it is illuminating.

Images of the Venetian widow in costume books of the time correspond with much of the advice given by Cabei, who was commenting on the most modestly dressed widows he saw around him and recommending their clothing to others. Cabei does not specifically call for widows to enter convents but to retain a chaste life within the community, and the number of widows found in the tertiary orders, indicates that he was reflecting something of the reality of the situation. Again with the question of remarriage, he recognises the incentives for the widow to take a new husband, and is well aware that many do remarry, but he is offering a practical alternative to what he saw happening around him.

What we can say about the use of Cabei's *Ornamenti* as a source is that, while one of its primary aims was the flattery of a noble patron, it was not solely for that purpose that he wrote. Although he was influenced by the common philosophies on marriage and the family expounded by the Church and by other prescriptive writers, he was prepared to deviate from them when considering the practical realities of widowhood for the noble woman. Christian philosophy is certainly at the heart of Cabei's writing, but not only for reasons of strict morality, but because he seems to have genuinely believed that his advice would be of spiritual benefit to the widow. Cabei was not only aiming to save the soul of the widow, or to make her presence in the community more acceptable to those whose moral standards and misogyny were easily offended by such potentially independent women; he also wanted to offer practical advice to make more tranquil the family life of widows. As with writers before him, Cabei clearly saw the order of the family as central to the stability of the state.

Cabei, probably newly arrived in Venice when composing *Ornamenti*, was influenced by writing from outside Venice, as well as that proliferating within it. It is difficult to know how popular *Ornamenti* itself was; it does not appear to have been as well known as Francesco Barbaro's *De Re Uxoriam* for example. What we do know about his place in the annals of prescriptive writing is that, while many of his views coincided with religious thinking and the prescriptive literature which had gone before, Cabei presented his ideas in a slightly different way. The question of how far Cabei affected later Venetian writings is one which cannot yet be answered, as no similar writings have been found later than *Ornamenti*. Nevertheless, in offering this advice, Cabei was still playing his part in the humanist philosophy of the family.

*Ornamenti*, and other prescriptive materials are important for the identification of what I have described as the 'ideal widow'. But this widow is ideal only for the portion of society



whose strict morality and sense of order required that women be chaste and restricted. Prescriptive writers by their very nature gave the image of society they would like to see, rather than the one they did see. They regarded themselves as the only arbiters of acceptable behaviour, one based on Christianity, but influenced heavily by the classical writings. What prescriptive writers tell us is about a generally masculine viewpoint, and one which was almost unattainable. The 'feminist' approach is one of perhaps equal unattainability, but at least one with an alternative perspective to that normally seen.

### The widow's ideal

There are certainly difficulties in considering what was perhaps the widow's ideal life, not least of all a lack of really appropriate sources for Venice, but Moderata Fonte's work, alongside that written by widows elsewhere and the other 'feminist' Venetian writers of the early modern period can offer some insight into the ways in which female views on widowhood could differ from the prescriptive ideal. Some female writers, for example Christine de Pizan, have followed much the same paths of their male contemporaries, emphasising chastity, and prudence, but the difference between female writers, however conservative their advice, and the male prescriptive writers, is in the reasoning behind the advice offered or the ideal projected.<sup>32</sup> For example, if a woman should behave prudently it was so that she should not be cheated, rather than because it would reflect well on the reputation of her dead husband.

Between the middle ages and the sixteenth century, Ferrante has argued, there was a decline in the number of women who were educated.<sup>33</sup> It was perhaps partially this fact which encouraged the debate on the education and position of women which arose from the fifteenth century.<sup>34</sup> The debate over female intellect was also influenced, however, by humanist interest in the importance of human achievement. Before the sixteenth century even writing by women rarely challenged the way women actually lived. Complaints about the lack of education and the

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<sup>32</sup> Christine de Pizan was herself widowed when she wrote the *Livres des Trois Virtus*, yet much of the advice she prescribes conforms to the standards set by other male prescriptive writers. She encourages chastity, and sobriety of action. She uses allegorical characters to instruct, and the example of the perfect noble widow, offering practical advice, but not encouraging women to break out of the moulds assigned to them by society, except through the very fact of her writing, which itself broke the mould.

L. Dulac (translated by Thelma Fenster), 'Mystical Inspiration and Political Knowledge', pp. 223-258.

<sup>33</sup> J. M. Ferrante, 'The Education of Women', p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Fahy has identified three of these treatises. Bartolomeo Gogio's *De Laudibus Mulierum* from 1489, dedicated to Eleanora d'Este, which argued for women's equality to men and their greater nobility. Mario Equicola in *De Mulieribus* considered how custom had forced women into a secondary role and Agostino Strozzi offered examples of how women in other societies had been able to play a very different role. C. Fahy, 'Three Early Renaissance Treatises', pp. 30-55.



restrictions placed upon women encouraged discussion about the nature of marriage and convent life, yet there were few practical suggestions for how the situation might be changed. There were about 50 examples in the 'Defence of Women' genre between 1524 and 1632 in Italy tackling the biological factors which determined gender, and the question of the fall from Eden.<sup>35</sup>

Cox notes that, until the 1500s, women were gaining "respect and sympathy" not "freedom and power" and it was not until after 1600 that the first substantial works by Italian women writers, arguing for women's intellect, were published. Venice, in fact, became a centre for the publication of writing on and by women, and yet produced a relatively small amount of it. Lucrezia Marinella and Moderata Fonte are among the best known Venetian women who participated in the general discussion of the nature of women and, although both wrote before 1600, it was only after the turn of the century that their work began to be published.<sup>36</sup> Arcangela Tarabotti wrote at the same time but her particular concern was those women who were forced into the cloister because of the inflated value of dowries, herself being one of those women.

Moderata Fonte was not actually from the patrician classes, but she came from an educated background, with her talents particularly cultivated by her uncle Giovanni Niccolò Doglioni. She also had a sympathetic husband, who had given her control of her own finances and allowed her to continue writing. Before her premature death in 1592 at the age of thirty seven, she had written a novel, a libretto and some verse, but it is *The Worth of Women*, posthumously published in 1600, which is of particular interest to this thesis. Although Fonte herself was not a widow, in this work she makes two of the seven characters widows, one old, one young, and in doing so comments on the prevalence and importance of widows within Venetian female society. Making one young and one old also helps establish the idea that, to contemporaries, there was no archetype of widow but that widows could come from any age group, whereas today the image is almost certainly one of elderly women.

As with the prescriptive writers, there are certainly problems with using 'feminist' writings to gain information about widows, but again, when this information corresponds with what is known from other material, it becomes an important source of knowledge. We have to

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<sup>35</sup> V. Cox, introduction to Moderata Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Lucrezia Marinella, *Della nobilita*.

Arcangela Tarabotti, *La semplicita ingannata*.

Arcangela Tarabotti, *Che le donne*.

Veronica Franco, a celebrated courtesan, was also a contemporary of these women, and she entered into the debate too. As a 'fallen woman' it was perhaps easier for her to enter the discourse, but her writing was denounced on moral grounds, even though it was clearly her intellect which was the actual threat. For more information about her writing see:

M. F. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*.



recognise Fonte's motives in writing such a work. She clearly felt that she had a contribution to make to the discussion on the status of women, and wanted to make that contribution in an entertaining way with a female audience in mind. The popularity of the work suggests that it struck a chord with contemporaries and adds to the validation of its use here. Fonte's background was a relatively well educated one, although she learnt from her brother, rather than having had a great deal of formal training, and she was writing for a similarly educated female audience as well as for men.

*The Worth of Women* is a dialogue, set around a group of Venetian noblewomen of varying ages and marital status, loosely based on the theme of men's unjustifiable hostility to women. Its ultimate aim, Cox notes, was "nothing less than that of critically reshaping contemporary beliefs about nature and the hierarchy of being in such a way as to secure a place for women consonant with its author's conception of their worth".<sup>37</sup> It is principally a domestic dialogue, with the insertion of an artificial rhetoric. The seven women are seated in a garden and, for their own amusement, determine to hold a discussion with one group to attack male authority, the other to defend it. The garden is the property of young widow Leonora, and the other widowed character, Adrianna, takes the role of judge in the discussion, attempting to balance the arguments of the two sides.

Most of the discussion on marriage is found on the first day of the two day discussion, the day which includes the most in the way of 'feminist' rhetoric. Fonte, assuming the worthiness of women, is concerned with the fact that men fail to recognise this. She raises introduces topics for discussion, such as the fact that increasing numbers of girls were being deprived of dowries, considering contemporary, practical issues, as well as the biblical, scientific and philosophical arguments commonly used in this type of debate. She does not necessarily offer many solutions to these problems but is at least showing that women were aware of the factors that were restricting their movements and behaviour. While Fonte's work can be seen as a call for political action, Cox believes that her proposals for life without men were not to be taken entirely seriously.<sup>38</sup>

From the very beginning of this tale Fonte's attitude towards widowhood is relatively clear. Thus, Leonora, the young widow, is noted as:

a sensible young woman, who, though young, rich and a widow,

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<sup>37</sup> V. Cox, introduction to Moderata Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>38</sup> V. Cox, introduction to Moderata Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, p. 16.



was in no hurry to find herself a new husband.<sup>39</sup>

For Fonte being sensible and not wanting to find a new husband, went hand in hand, suggesting that she felt only a stupid or unfortunate woman would choose to remarry. The question of widowhood comes up again at the end of the first day, when discussion turns to those women who loved their husbands so deeply that they could see no point in continuing once they have been widowed.<sup>40</sup> These women are neither censured or praised for their actions, just recognised as women of deep, if misplaced, feelings.

When the discussion moves on to the more practical issues of dowry, it becomes clear that noble widows in Venice had the potential to be in a far better financial situation than most other women. While the workings of the dowry return system have yet to be examined in substantial detail, it appears that many widows did actually have at least a part of their dowry returned within a relatively short period of time, sometimes despite disputes with relatives.<sup>41</sup> Fonte's characters consider how a woman with a dowry could live if she did not have a husband, and conclude that marrying makes a servant of a woman who otherwise could live like a queen.<sup>42</sup> Surely a widow, where the reclamation process worked, was precisely a woman with a dowry and no husband. While the issue is more complicated than that, with widows having obligations to children and other relatives for example, Fonte is suggesting that financial restrictions were the main thing separating women from a life of relative freedom.

On the second day, one of the topics considered for discussion is the question of dress and one section of dialogue is indicative about the dress of widows. Lucretia, referring to the way men dress, and their views on colours, says;

It's as though black conferred a certain air of reputation and dignity  
on the wearer, more than any other colour.<sup>43</sup>

Corinna also sets out clearly why the question of ornament was so important to those advising widows on dress, saying;

Men say that all this finery we wear betrays a corrupt heart  
underneath and often endangers our virtue. But they're quite  
wrong: as I said earlier, women's dress could hardly  
endanger their virtue if only men would stop pestering them.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> M. Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, p. 46.

<sup>40</sup> M. Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, pp. 109-111.

<sup>41</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>42</sup> M. Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>43</sup> M. Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, p. 234.

<sup>44</sup> M. Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, p. 236.



The implications of these points are that it was men and not women who considered the wearing of black to confer dignity on the wearer and that it was the fault of men who pestered women that their virtue was endangered and that, if men behaved with similar virtue, then how women dressed would be of no consequence. Both of these parts have repercussions on the advice given to widows in other contexts.

In the last few pages of the dialogue we are presented with the situation as perhaps it was really seen by Fonte. Adrianna, widowed twice herself, having had two husbands she was not particularly happy with, nevertheless tries to encourage Leonora the younger widow to remarry, “if only to avoid the risk of giving occasion for malicious gossip and slander”.<sup>45</sup> Leonora herself, despite having heartily refused to remarry earlier in the discussion, has to acknowledge that Adrianna’s advice is sound and sensible. Fonte realises that despite her contribution, the situation for widows such as Leonora is not likely to change greatly. In this case it is the widow who does not want to remarry; yet peer pressure persuades her that it is still the most acceptable manoeuvre.

*The Worth of Women* does not dedicate that much time to the question of widowhood, despite its characters, but where it does make relevant comment, it offers opinions put extremely succinctly. Comparison made between the suggestions made within it and the advice offered by Cabei offers interesting results. Although it is clear that on questions of dress the two differ, and that the views on husbands expressed in the two works are also divergent, nevertheless, there is a common theme of widowhood celibacy. It is interesting to see this commonality. Cabei, and other humanist writers argue that widows should not remarry because it is disrespectful, damaging to the soul, dangerous to children. Fonte’s protagonists argue the same point, for different reasons, that no woman in her right mind would chose to have another husband and that she is laying herself open to even more abuse and the loss of her liberty. And despite these two views, the rates of second marriages suggest that much of society felt the ills of remarriage to be fewer than the risks of lone females.<sup>46</sup>

Fonte and other ‘feminist’ writers are important to this chapter on images of widowhood because they opened up alternative lines of discussion at a time when the advice most frequently offered was that of the conduct manuals of the prescriptive writers. That female views were being expressed in Venice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries suggests that not all widows would have felt pressure to try and conform to the ideal. In fact some noble widows were in a

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<sup>45</sup> M. Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, p. 259



better position to try and attain the more independent lifestyle offered as a picture by Fonte in *The Worth of Women*, than the prescriptive ideal.

### The Widow in Stereotype

Carlton's work for London has been extremely useful for identifying the stereotypical widow of literature and the theatre and suggesting some of the reasons why the stereotype may have been created.<sup>47</sup> The myth of the widow as highly sexed, a constant source of love interest from fortune-hunting younger men, rich and easily consoled is one which is found in English literature, but it is also evident elsewhere. The phenomenon of the *Charivari* in France and parts of Italy offers evidence that widows there were regarded as a threat, and that ridicule was seen as the best means of defence against them. Literary evidence for Venice backs up the stereotypes seen elsewhere, suggesting that they were something of an international creation.

In Stefano Guazzo's *La Civile Conversazione*, he does not condemn all widows with the same evils. For him, some widows fall into one stereotype, of the lustful, desperate, uncaring, immodest widow, the rest come into the 'ideal' group. This homemaker/whore distinction, not seemingly used by Cabei, appears to have made more acceptable the presence of widows within society for some men.

Pietro Aretino's work offers alternative images, from a quite different vantage point but with the same stereotype evident in the background. His *Dialogues* take place firstly between Nanna and Antonia, two prostitutes and then between Nanna and her daughter Pippa. In these discourses Aretino describes the advantages and disadvantages of life as a nun, a wife and a whore, but with eroticism and wit, striking a blow "against sexual hypocrisy".<sup>48</sup> In the first tale about a widow, the woman was only widowed for a matter of days, as it was her lover who did away with her husband. Very soon after becoming a widow she married her lover, conforming to the stereotype that widows are easily consoled and lustful, if they ever cared about their first husband at all.<sup>49</sup> What divides this example from that found in other literature, is the short discussion which follows;

ANTONIA      She could have remained a widow and satisfied her hunger for that door knocker just as well.

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<sup>46</sup> For a more details discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of remarriage, see Chapter 6.

<sup>47</sup> C. Carlton, 'The Widow's Tale', pp. 118-129.

<sup>48</sup> Page 8 of the Preface to P. Aretino, *Dialogues*.

<sup>49</sup> A similar example is found on pages 87-91.



NANNA I shall tell you some other time why she did not remain a widow. Anyway, widows' lives are such that it would take up a whole conversation by itself. But I can tell you this: widows are much subtler than nuns, wives and women at street corners.

ANTONIA How's that?

NANNA Nuns, married women and whores get themselves reamed and burnished by any sort of oaf and idiot, but widows are combed and brushed by prayers, fasts, devotions, sermons, masses, vespers, offices, alms and all the seven works of charity.<sup>50</sup>

Aretino is aiming to ridicule the characters he has created by the outrages that they report, but is perhaps closer to the truth than many contemporaries were prepared to admit.<sup>51</sup> The list of activities we find attributed to the widow by Nanna corresponds quite closely with those descriptions of what the ideal widow should do found in Cabeï's work. Perhaps the line between stereotype and the extremes of reality was only a thin one. While it would be completely outrageous to suggest that almost any widow really behaved as do those described by Aretino, the stereotypes were not created out of pure fantasy, but through distortions of the truth.

A second scene which Aretino describes is very different and far more sinister. The widow in question is a peasant woman working in the house of a noble couple. The lady of the house, on hearing that her husband and his friends intended to use this widow as a form of sexual entertainment, substituted herself and the widow in reality has only a small part to play. What is important about the story is that it seemed perfectly feasible to the writer that a widow would be used as the toy of sexual pleasure by a group of nobles. Although in the tale the abuse to which the widow would have been subject is seen as a pleasure rather than a violation, that the situation was regarded as acceptable is indicative of widows as victims of sexual attacks.<sup>52</sup> Aretino may of course have been more reflecting literary conventions on the widow rather than describing the reality he saw about him, but nevertheless, the image is an interesting one.

Goldoni, writing in the eighteenth century, also used a widow as one of the central characters in his play entitled 'The Artful Widow'. Although the title of the play suggests that Goldoni is perpetuating the stereotype of the scheming widow, the image he portrays is in fact more complex. Rosanna, a young widow, who lives in her brother-in-law's house, although retaining her own fortune, attracts a number of suitors because of her beauty and talents. While

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<sup>50</sup> P Aretino, *Dialogues*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>51</sup> Rosenthal suggests that Aretino's work was in part a criticism of his own age. He was commenting on situations which he had come across by inflating the characters and circumstances, yet retaining some perspective on what he was describing.

Page 9 of the Preface to P. Aretino, *Dialogues*.

<sup>52</sup> See G. Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros*, pp. 166-168.



the fact that she retains these suitors and tricks them to test their fidelity is a sign that she is artful, she does not maliciously dupe these men.<sup>53</sup> In fact her talents and loyalty towards her family and country are praised.<sup>54</sup> It is perhaps a reflection of changes in society by the eighteenth century that 'The Artful Widow' did not appear to have been that artful. It may also be a sign that the stereotypes portrayed elsewhere were regarded as too extreme by Goldoni, who consequently toned them down to make his play more believable.

Venetian examples of the stereotypical widow were not as straightforward as those found in English literature, nevertheless, they contain, to a greater or lesser extent, many of the constants found elsewhere, lustfulness, inconstancy, slyness, greed. Their importance here is as yet another alternative viewpoint to the "ideal widow". In stark contrast to Cabe's image, Aretino's widows represented the epitome of the fears of those who wrote and advocated the conduct manuals.

### Pictures of the Widow

This final section will look at Venetian widows as they were portrayed in visual images and paintings. While these often offer idealised images, they are ones which were accepted as representative by contemporaries. There are a number of very useful sources which can supply graphic images, the most important of these being costume books. These were not designed to be instructive, but to describe to outsiders how the inhabitants of a particular area dressed. The two works to be considered here, Cesare Vecellio's *Degli Habiti Antichi et Moderni* and Pietro Bertelli's *Omnium Fere Gentium Nostrae Aetatis Habitus* both contain a number of images entitled 'The Venetian Widow' and show how artists of the time wanted the Venetian widow to be portrayed. They are particularly important to this study because, although they include images of all types of people from all over the world, including widows from Florence, Rome, and England, they were published in Venice and Padua, and perhaps the accuracy of their Venetian images would have been particularly scrutinised. The fact that Vecellio's work ran to three editions, each with the same image of the widow, from 1590, 1598 and 1664, and yet with different wording, proving it had been edited, suggests that the images were considered to be relatively accurate.

If the main purpose of these works was descriptive rather than prescriptive, as would seem likely, particularly because some of the images are not very flattering, then they can be

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<sup>53</sup> C. Goldoni, 'The Artful Widow', p. 176.

<sup>54</sup> C. Goldoni, 'The Artful Widow', p. 144.



regarded as an important source. The widows pictured are noble, and thus only offer a restricted view but are important because of the details they give. Vecellio's work has added importance because of the descriptions which accompany the images.

Dress was important to the image of the widow and the very existence of special mourning clothes is an indicator about the status of widows in society, marking them out as different from married women. Widows were contaminated by the death of their husbands and needed to be isolated, a fact that is seen also by the fact that in England the first forty days of mourning were called 'quarantine'. Early mourning clothes in fact held a great resemblance to the habits of nuns, and mourning was strictly observed, especially in the first days after the death. Pisetzky has suggested that, by the sixteenth century, Spanish influence meant increased severity in mourning, as colours were still seen until the end of the fifteenth century.<sup>55</sup> Into the seventeenth century funerals were becoming ever more spectacular, and this accompanied the growing influence of fashion upon mourning wear.

Sumptuary laws, and complaints about the conduct of Italian widows also indicate changes in dress. St Bernardino commented that widows "do not appear to be attired as you were formerly.... [now] just like the courtesan".<sup>56</sup> One aspect of the widow's dress which caused ambiguity was the use of veils. On the one hand they were seen as a way of disguising identity which could lead to subversion of the established hierarchy and order.<sup>57</sup> On the other, they covered the hair and forehead and differentiated the widow from other women. The way in which attitudes to the dress of the widows differed from those to married women, as far as the politicians were concerned, was in the utility of their dress. While married women dressed luxuriously could be a credit to their family and to the state of Venice, widows were supposed to present an image of chastity, which was not conferred by luxurious costume.<sup>58</sup> Laws on dress were not easily enforceable, yet the picture of widows seen in costume books and portraits suggest that many widows were conforming to the prescriptive suggestions that they wear dark colours in a modest style.<sup>59</sup> What they cannot show, however, is the quality of the materials used,

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<sup>55</sup> R. Levi Pisetzky, *Storia della Costume*, p. 263.

<sup>56</sup> Niccolini Genevra di Camugliano, *The Chronicle of a Florentine Family*, p. 55.

<sup>57</sup> M. Newett, 'The Sumptuary Laws of Venice', p. 268.

<sup>58</sup> Hughes talks about an occasion in 1459 when the Venetian government in fact encouraged women to break the sumptuary laws to impress the French ambassador who was visiting.

D. O. Hughes, 'Sumptuary Laws', p. 90.

<sup>59</sup> Taylor notes that one unusual thing about the laws relating to Venetian mourning wear is that those in mourning were still required to wear coloured clothing on feast days.

L. Taylor, *Mourning Dress*.



and some widows would have been able to wear appropriate colours and styles yet to still disregard sumptuary laws by the luxury of the fabrics they used.

Bertelli and Vecellio's works are important for offering images which are generally regarded as quite accurate, and Vecellio's descriptions, perhaps more than the images themselves, provide vital insight.<sup>60</sup> He notes that on the death of their husbands, the widows of Venice reject all vanity and ornament, they dress in black both inside and outside the house, they wear a fixed veil which hides their breast and cover their hair with a "*Scuffieta*". If these widows want to remarry they leave their hair a little uncovered so that everyone knows their intentions.<sup>61</sup> Bertelli's widows are not accompanied by description, but the first two also wear long veils, covering their foreheads, with handkerchiefs in their hands but the cleavage visible. The third widow, noted as Italian rather than Venetian, has no visible cleavage and a rosary rather than a handkerchief in her hand.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Pisetzky notes that "Vecellio è ricco di informazioni descrivendo gli abiti portati in queste tristi occasioni con umana simpatia e precisa evidenze".

"Vecellio is rich in information describing the clothes worn in these sad occasions, with human sympathy and precise evidence."

R. Levi Pisetzky, *Storia della Costume*, p. 263.

<sup>61</sup> C. Vecellio, *De gli Habit*, 1590 edition. This edition contains more detailed description than either the 1598 or the 1664 editions.

<sup>62</sup> Pietro Bertelli, *Diversarum Nationum*, Padua 1579. The first widow is found on page six of the first book, but thereafter pages are confusingly numbered. The Italian widow is found in the volume dated 1563, on page 4.



## DELLE VEDOVE.

**L**E Vedoue di Venetia abbracciano quanto all'Habito con la morte del marito, la morte di tutte le vanità, e di tutti gli ornamenti. Perche oltre al vestir di nero, portano i capelli coperti, serrano il petto con un velo assai fisso, portano la cappa fino la fronte, & se ne vanno per le strade meste, & à lochino. Quando hanno animo di vedouare, usano lo ascico, nè più si riuettono di colore per alcun tempo, non vogliono rimaritarsi. Stando in casa, portano sopra i capelli una scuffietta, che copre loro le trecce. Vengono sempre di nero, tanto in casa, quanto fuori. Ma dimeno quando volessero rimaritarsi, è loro lecito usare senza biasimo alcuno qualche ornamento, ma di poca apparenza, & lasciare alquanto più scoperti i capelli, che tutto serue à chi le vede per segno della loro intentione. Questo habito rappresenta una Gentildonna honestissima di Casa Contarini.



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Image and description of a Venetian widow taken from Vecellio's *De gli Habiti...*, p. 134.



These images suggest that, on the whole, noble Venetian widows were conforming to the modest picture encouraged by Cabei, although Bertelli clearly regards the Venetian widow as more sexual than does Vecellio. Vecellio perhaps had an ulterior motive. By identifying his widow as a noblewoman of the Contarini family, he had to portray her as she would best represent her family rather than as a typical example, but this motive is negated by the fact that Vecellio's and Bertelli's widows on the whole dress similarly. Both have their widows dressed in dark clothing and both indicate that long veils were worn over the head. Vecellio's acceptance as normal that a widow would give a visual signal if she wanted to remarry is interesting and adds to the belief that he was not trying to represent solely an ideal. It seems likely that Venetian noble widows tried to maintain a profile which did not draw attention to themselves when they were dressed to go out in public. They dressed as the prescriptive writers would have them, on the whole, and maintained the habit-like simplicity of style that has been seen elsewhere. The only real problem with the images offered is that, while Pisetzky and Taylor both argue for a change in mourning wear over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this is not reflected in Vecellio's illustrations.

Costume books also allow us to compare the dress of the widow with that of other members of society. Vecellio notes that the Roman widows' clothes resemble a religious habit and it is quite clear from the image of the *Pizzochere* found in his work that there was a great similarity between the dress of the widow and the habit of the third orders. It is perhaps not coincidental that so many widows requested to be buried in that habit, as Vecellio notes that widows were the type of women who took up this kind of uncloistered religious observance.<sup>63</sup> A further interesting comparison is found between the Venetian widow and the courtesan. In the image it is clear that the dress of the two is very similar, only the facial and bodily expressions are different. In the description, Vecellio points out that "S' è detto fin qui, che quelle meretrici, che vogliono acquistar credito col mezo della finta honestà, si servono dell'Habito vedovile".<sup>64</sup> This suggests a lot both about widows' clothing and about the status of widows within society. If widows' clothing could confer respectability, then it follows that suitably dressed widows were considered to be chaste and good members of society. This alters the tone of St Bernardino's

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<sup>63</sup> On the Roman widow, C. Vecellio, quoted in R. Levi Pisetzky, *Storia della Costume*, p. 264. On the Pizzochere, C. Vecellio, *Degli Habiti*, 1590 edition, p. 147.

<sup>64</sup> C. Vecellio, *Degli Habiti*, 1590 edition, p. 138. "It is said that prostitutes who want to acquire the appearance of honesty, use widows clothing".



## CORTIGIANE FVOR DI CASA.



**S**'E' detto fin qui, che quelle meretrici, che vogliono acquistar credito col mezzo della finta honestà, si seruono dell'habito vedoute, & di quello anchora delle maritate: & quelle specialmente, che hanno qualche colore di matrimonio. Già s'eleuano la maggior parte d'esse andar in Habito di donzelle; usanza non anchora dismessa affatto, benchè sia con moda della maggiore. Di maniera che non potendogliar sempre serrate, & coperte con la cappa, che portano, & non potendo d'altra parte esser vedute; sono finalmente sforzate scoprirsi alquanto, & è perciò impossibile, ch'elie non sieno conosciute a qualche gesto. Et perche sono loro proibite le perle, sono in particolare conosciute per tal, quando mostrano scoperto il collo. Et perciò l'infelici, per riparare a questo, si tengono come suol dirsi) un berione, che seruendo loro del nome di marito, l'assicuri dell'uso delle pompe, & sotto questo pretesto sia loro permesso il poter usare tutto quello, che dalle leggi è loro comunemente vietato. Le loro sottane sono di broccarelli di diuersi colori, & ricamate con quella maggiore spesa, che esse possono. Portano scarpe alla Romana dentro alle pianelle; & queste sono le Cortigiane di più riguardo. Ma quelle, che alla scoperta, & ne' luoghi publici esercitano questa infame professione, portano giubbotti di seta con cordelle d'oro, & ricamati in qualche modo: & così fanno delle carpette, ch'elie poi coprono con trauerse, o grembiati di seta. Portano in capo un fazzoletto di seta, & vanno a questa foggia ciuettando per tutta la Città, & essendo facilmente conosciute da tutti, sono anche facilmente molestate da tutti con cenni, & con parole.

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Contemporary paintings of widows, of which there are few, present a similar picture. For example, in the *Instituzione di Ricovero e di Educazione*, on the Giudecca, hang a number of portraits of wealthy widow patrons, and all are recognisable by their dress. The agenda behind these paintings was of course that they were given to the convents they entered, and thus the images were those of the ideal widow. Modest dress and humility is also evident among the widows whose pictures are found in the *Crociferia* in Cannaregio. As worthy recipients of charity, the widows resident in this institution were pictured with its patrons to signify the goodness of the patrons.

Catherine King's examination of widows as patrons has shown that, while widows occasionally requested representations of themselves, more frequently widow patrons left money to commemorate dead men.<sup>65</sup> In the Venetian tradition, where widows were found in portraits it was most of those of the votive type. Widows were rarely pictured full length, sometimes in the distance or background and often having aged, which was a sign of sexual abstinence.<sup>66</sup> What goes against the ideals of prescriptive literature, however, as King points out, is the fact that "these votive self-portraits rather surprisingly often seem to have had an eye to an audience outside the woman's family".<sup>67</sup> Widows were portraying the ideal image through their portraits, of modesty and humility, yet going against it by having the paintings painted in the first place, and then ensuring that they were placed in public locations.

The amount of information found and the variety of images offered to us within the sources used have justified their use as materials for historical examination and have enforced and enhanced what we already knew from more conventional sources. The chapter has examined a number of stereotypes which were current in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Venice, both those constantly expounded by religious and moralistic writers, and those found in more unusual sources, such as the work of the 'feminist' writers and Aretino's *Dialogues*. While none of the images presented can be said to accurately represent what we know of the life of the early modern Venetian widow, they show that there was not just one correct method of behaviour as the prescriptive writers would have had us believe. Few widows, no matter what Cabeo suggested about his patroness, could live up to the ideal image presented by these writers and few could hope for the ideal of freedom seen in the imaginations of Fonte's characters. Similarly, it seems unlikely that the oversized caricatures developed by Aretino were very closely connected to real

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<sup>65</sup> C. E. King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*, p. 99.

<sup>66</sup> C. E. King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*, p. 138 and p. 173.

<sup>67</sup> C. E. King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*, p. 150.



life. We can take aspects from each image which correspond with other evidence, while still retaining a healthy scepticism.

These sources have also been used in this thesis to offer some perception of how contemporaries represented the widow in writing and to elaborate on the little evidence we have about how widows saw themselves. The creation of such extremes is often a reaction to the behaviour seen by the authors and regarded as unacceptable. Aretino may well have been commenting on the freedom held by some widows, and the disrespect shown to some husbands by making these events happen in unreal proportions. Fonte was reacting to the contraction of possibilities, particularly for the unmarried woman, in early modern Venice, by suggesting alternatives. These suggestions therefore represented a form of protest. The prescriptive writers were also attempting to get widows to behave in a way which conformed with their thinking and not in the way in which they quite clearly saw around them. Advice would not have been necessary if every widow lived up to the ideal.

We can conclude that, while none of the images offered by contemporaries offered a truly representative picture, all contribute to our knowledge of the life of the widow. Any representation is evidence that they were a recognised force in society, in itself a telling fact. That Fonte chose to make two out of her seven characters widows indicates that within female society they held a prominent position and one which conferred respect. This image of widows as women deserving respect is continued in the evidence that widows' costume was seen to confer respectability. Widows' importance and position within early modern Venetian society should not be overlooked.



## **Identity and the Widow – Chapter 8**

So far this thesis has considered how the law, money, family, and society could influence the life of the Venetian widow. What it will consider in this chapter is a less tangible factor affecting the widow's life, identity. In the context of this chapter, identity will relate to the use of surnames, and the consequent identification of the widow with natal or marital family. The chapter will question what affected identity, addressing themes of age, education, occupation and authority. The importance of marital identity to society and the participation of family, friends and acquaintances in the creation of widowhood identity needs to be considered, and this chapter will raise the question 'how did a woman have to behave for the neighbourhood to be convinced that she was widowed'?

Within this theme, age is worthy of particular discussion, because it not only affected the widow's personal identity, but also how society viewed the woman, and thus how the widowhood progressed. This chapter will consider the question of how age related to remarriage, and whether age was a factor in whether the widow saw herself, or was seen by society, as a suitable marriage partner.

There were a number of factors which gave the widow a sense of her own personal identity. The opportunity to head a household, take up an occupation, participate in the intellectual life of the city or enter a religious order all had a part to play in offering the widow a position within society, beyond that of wife of a deceased man. Loss of a spouse affected the identity of a woman far more than a man, and it is interesting to consider the way in which widows were compared with orphans, because of their poverty, and virgins because of their sexuality. Widows were vulnerable yet empowered and there is a need for balanced examination of these contributors to identity, as well as the advantages, and disadvantages of widowhood as an identity.

Age as a defining factor in widowhood progression and identity has been increasingly of interest to historians over recent decades and will be the primary factor to be considered here. Many studies have concentrated on age at first marriage, age gaps between spouses and age as a determinant of social position, for example in connection with age of emancipation.<sup>1</sup> What studies of widowhood require is a more detailed examination of the way age at widowhood affected the progression of that widowhood, particularly as, since the nineteenth century,

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<sup>1</sup> See S. Chojnacki, 'Measuring Adulthood', pp. 371-395.  
A. Molho, 'Deception and Marriage Strategy', pp. 193-217.  
D. Herlihy, 'Age, Property and Career', pp. 261-278.



widowhood has been almost synonymous with old age. Up to a point studies of remarriage have satisfied that requirement, frequently concluding that a widow was more likely to remarry if she was widowed young. This issue requires consideration for Venice.

A survey of age and remarriage has been carried out for this thesis through careful examination of the gap between first and second marriage, although it is recognised that this could encompass a lengthy widowhood. The gap between first and second marriage ranged from one year to 26 years, indicating that, even after a long marriage, or a long widowhood, remarriage was a possibility. What is more informative for this study is the calculation of the average gap between first and second marriage. Europe-wide the average length of a marriage was over 15 years, yet, where there was a second marriage in Venice, the average gap between first and second marriages was only 10 to 12 years.<sup>2</sup> The smallest gap between first and second marriages was just 8 months and the largest 26 years and 10 months.

Where there was a third marriage, the first and second marriages were both significantly shorter than the norm. For the first of three marriages the average gap between that and the second marriage was 6 years, and from second to third, a further 8 years.<sup>3</sup> Where women were widowed after a normal length marriage, and were into their forties, beyond the age of reproductive sexuality, they were, it seems, less likely to enter into a second marriage, either because they felt themselves not to need a second husband, or because society (and potential husbands) viewed older widows as unsuitable marriage partners.

Age did not just affect remarriage either. The case of Maddalena Nerli, a Florentine, offers ample evidence that age could equal increased responsibility and respect for the early modern widow.<sup>4</sup> After her first marriage she lost guardianship of her male children, and was persuaded to remarry by her natal family, but following the death of her second husband she maintained guardianship of her children, later grandchildren and great grandchildren. With girls widowed as young as fifteen or sixteen it is not surprising that they were prepared to forego some independence for advice and security. Conversely, if a woman was widowed at a much greater age, then not only was she more experienced and more likely to have strong opinions about her own future, she was also less likely to have parents or parents-in-law to object to her choices.

While it is clear that a very young widow was often not in a good position to retain control of her own person, it must be recognised that much older widows may have faced their

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<sup>2</sup> Samples were taken for marriages where the dates of both first and second marriages were known. The gap was calculated in days and an average taken. 17 examples were used to calculate the 1550s figures, 27 for the 1590s and 33 for the 1630s. See Chapter 2, footnotes 26-33 for see sources of marriage information.

<sup>3</sup> A suitable sample for this was only found for the 1590s where 8 examples of third marriage were found.



own separate difficulties. Venetian law cared for the younger widow, or at least the widow with minor children (implying that the widow was not of great age) by guaranteeing her accommodation as long as she was guardian of those children. Widows with younger children were more likely to head their own households than widows with grown-up children, who were more likely to live with their children as dependents. That poverty was almost invariably associated with old age, and reduced ability to earn is also an indicator that a very advanced age at widowhood was not always to the widow's advantage. Perhaps some of the discrepancies here relate to class differences. An elderly widow of the patriciate with a sizeable inheritance, life interest in her husband's estate, or a reclaimed dowry was unlikely to face the financial difficulties and lack of choice faced by the widow of an artisan, Arsenal worker, or sailor, who could not continue her husband's business, yet could not adequately survive without employment. A young widow of the upper classes with children may well have had the protection of law and family, whereas one of the lower classes, particularly one without close family, faced potential destitution if widowed with young children.

Particularly if widowed young some women returned to live with their families and the question of retained contact with the natal family and its connection to identity needs to be examined. The use of maiden over marital name by a widow could be a sign that she regarded her personal identity to be primarily associated with her natal family and it is noted by Ferro that in some cases it was important for a woman to maintain her maiden name on marriage.<sup>5</sup> This was not for her benefit, but was to be the case for women of low status marrying nobles, who did not automatically gain the rights of their husbands. They were to take their husbands' names without losing their own. The frequency with which widows were found to be using their maiden names, however, suggests that it could not be only for reasons of low birth.

In favour of continued natal identity, Chojnacka has argued against the idea that in Venice adult daughters were estranged, and Cowan has shown how important family membership was for the status of the individual.<sup>6</sup> There is no reason why this sense of identity should not also apply to the widow. Just as the wealth of a family determined the marital prospects for a daughter of that lineage, the family's identity could be instrumental in determining the widow's social and personal status. With an increase in the importance of matriarchal family identity for the entry of patrician sons into the Great Council, women were made more keenly aware that

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<sup>4</sup> G. Calvi, 'Maddalena Nerli', pp. 312-337.

<sup>5</sup> Marco Ferro, *Dizionario*, p. 278. Section entitled 'Moglie'.

<sup>6</sup> M. Chojnacka, *City of Women*, p. 170.

A. F. Cowan, *The Urban Patriciate*, pp. 90 - 125.



choice of a good husband alone did not recompense in the eyes of the law for natal relatives who worked in manual occupations for example. This factor influenced a woman's ability to bear patrician offspring. Before marriage women were reliant on their family's reputation to win them a 'good' husband and the better her family the more bargaining power the woman could retain within marriage.<sup>7</sup> After marriage that reputation could once again come into play and this is seen in the literary example of Rosaura, found in Goldoni's 'The Artful Widow'. Although she was the widow of a wealthy and respectable man, she was aware that some European nobles would regard her as nothing more than the daughter of a 'vile' merchant.<sup>8</sup> Evidence from the *Prove di Nobiltà* of the *Avogaria di Comun* also shows that widows entering new marriages with patricians and wanting to bear patrician offspring, still had to prove their status through an examination of the occupation and behaviour of their natal family.<sup>9</sup>

Widows' connections with their natal relatives, in terms of bequests, residency and guardianship have been discussed in Chapter 5; however the aim here is to establish what families contributed to the widow's personal and social identity. Residency was clearly an important part of this, and Chabot notes that the widow whose dowry troubles forced her to live alone, lost the identity of both marital and natal families.<sup>10</sup> Alessandra Strozzi in Florence actually refused to live with her daughter and had little contact with her natal family, a sign that she felt her identity was as part of her husband's lineage.<sup>11</sup> In Venice, few women returned to live with their own parents on widowhood, but even fewer lived with their in-laws. More lived with siblings or children, suggesting that residency related more to personal connections than identification with natal or marital parents. Funerary arrangements also suggested family identity and the choice to be buried with natal family rather than husband was a clear indication of a widow's personal feelings about her identity. In the 12 cases found where widows noted who they wished to be buried with, half named natal family, either mother, sister or family tomb.

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<sup>7</sup> Kalas notes Jeanne Gontault, whose marriage from a very wealthy family into one of more modest means gave her bargaining power within that relationship.

R. J. Kalas, 'The Noble Widow's Place', p. 524.

<sup>8</sup> It is useful to note here that in some cases 'vile' could equal 'manual' and thus a vile merchant would perhaps be placed below a merchant who was not physically involved in trade; however, in this case merchant seems to mean simply not of aristocratic breeding.

C. Goldoni, 'The Artful Widow', p. 176. Act 3, scene 3.

<sup>9</sup> A. Cowan, 'Love, Honour and the Avogaria di Comun'. Cowan is continuing research into the importance of family status to widows appealing to the Prove di Nobiltà to be permitted to marry into the patriciate.

<sup>10</sup> I. Chabot, 'Widowhood and Poverty', p. 297.

<sup>11</sup> L. Martines, 'A Way of Looking at Women', p. 21.



It is Klapisch-Zuber's work on "The Cruel Mother" which has raised the question of widowhood family association most controversially.<sup>12</sup> She considers the Florentine household as a male kinship group with women just passing through, yet goes on to explain that women also were only extremely rarely identified except by their father's or husband's name. An additional complication to the question of widows' family identity is the fact that, although not actual members of either lineage, widows were still expected to remain chaste and modest for the benefit of the reputations of these two houses. Disconnection of the woman's identity was not therefore clean cut. The tale of Giovanni and Lusanna in fact shows that enduring contact and identification of a widow with her natal lineage could be very important. Brucker suggests that Lusanna, because of the high status of her family, knew her story about the bigamy of her second husband would be taken seriously in the archbishop's court, even though his family was of even higher status.<sup>13</sup> Closer to Venice, Smith notes that in Verona, such was the identification between widows and their families that wills were indexed under natal family name.<sup>14</sup> This sometimes happened in Venice, but was not normally the case.

In Venice the need for public recognition of ancestry among the patriciate was high, and affected women too, but the ways in which this ancestry was commonly recorded, through public registers rather than private memoirs, meant that women were often excluded. The nature of Venetian identity, with the family and the nobility as more important than the individual, also encouraged the invisibility of women. Widows were evident more than other women because of their participation in activities recorded by notaries, including property exchange, whereas other women were only usually found in the marriage registers, yet they were still relatively rarely recorded in family trees and other genealogical sources.

An examination of marriage contracts and wills has provided some information about how closely connected widows felt their identities to be with those of their husbands, and how closely with their natal families. Four different ways of forming a widow's name have been discovered, each offering a different slant on widowhood identity. Perhaps the most expected form used, to be noted here as **Form A** is where the widow identified herself purely with her husband, for example, Elena widow of Alessandro Salamon. In **Form B** the widow is connected more specifically to her father, for example, Elena, daughter of Giulio Barbaro, widow of Alessandra Salamon. **Form C** created more of an independent identity, although still one attached to her father, for example, Elena Barbaro, daughter of Giulio, widow of Alessandro

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<sup>12</sup> C. Klapisch-Zuber, "The Cruel Mother", pp. 117-131.

<sup>13</sup> G. A. Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna*.



Salamon. The final form, **Form D**, disassociated the widow more from both male identifiers, for example, Elena Barbaro, widow of Alessandro Salamon. Although the husband's name is still used in forms **B**, **C**, and **D** it is not the primary identifier of the widow as it is in form **A**.

	Marriage Contracts	Wills
Form A	0	12
Form B	5	21
Form C	11	5
Form D	5	13
Total	21	51

**Table 8.1** showing the number of widows using each form of name from samples of marriage contracts and wills.<sup>15</sup>

What is evident from the marriage contracts is that use of the father's name was a common way for a widow to identify herself. Women still saw themselves as primarily connected to their natal families, and to the surname of that family, not just for reasons of low birth, but for reasons of pride, pragmatism and custom. In their wills most widows retained that connection with their families, and considered it important enough to use the name in combination with their husband's name. That no widows used only their husband's name as an identifier in marriage contracts is significant. Widows were creating a new marriage, and came to it still from the natal family, despite the intervening marriage. While drawing conclusions from such information is not without risks, that the use of this variety forms was widespread suggests that it was not purely convention which would cause a widow to sign her name in a particular way.

It has often been assumed in the past that marital status was the primary definer of a woman's identity and that a woman noted without an indication of marital status or husband's name must be single. Research for this thesis has however discovered evidence to challenge these assumptions, not just through examination of the forms of identification, but also through

<sup>14</sup> A. A. Smith, 'Locating Power and Influence', p. 441.  
<sup>15</sup> The possibility that some widows were noted without any mention of previous husbands or martial status is considered below. This means that there was in fact a fifth name form used by some widows, but, as only biographical research can identify these women as widows it has not been possible to use this **Form E** of the woman's name, with no mention of a husband, for the purposes of this study.  
All marriage contract used were from the 1590s, see Chapter 2, footnote 29 for details of marriage contracts and footnote 15 for details of women's wills.



consideration of the consistency with which widows were noted as such. A sample of marriage contracts and registers were used and comparison made between the numbers of widows noted within the index, the marriage registers and the marriage contracts.

	1550s	1590s	1630s
Total number of widows found	51	59	47
Number of widows noted only in index	5	12	4
Number of widows noted in index and first source (marriage register)	35	13	18
Number of widows noted as such only in second source (marriage contract or second marriage register)	11	34	25

**Table 8.2** showing the numbers of widows only noted as such within and outside the main marriage registers or officially registered contracts.<sup>16</sup>

These results challenge assumptions about the importance of widowhood status. If it was clerical error which caused the omissions of widowhood status from registers and indices, then the fact that a woman was widowed was clearly not considered that important. Simple error could not always have been the cause though, and some widows and their new husbands clearly felt it would be easier to register the marriage with the *Avogaria di Comun* if the fact of widowhood was withheld, even though they were prepared to admit to it in the notarial marriage contract itself. Marital status cannot now be assumed and this is significant for future Venetian research. Widowhood was not always stated, and this suggests that the women concerned and those making the records did not always consider it to be the most important means of identification. This evidence also raises questions about the advantages and disadvantages of widowhood status which will be discussed in greater detail below.



The identity of a widow was inevitably attached to her husband and the fact that he was dead, but also to his living status and person. The loss of his physical presence put the widow in an ambiguous position and one which was of concern to family, the Church and other contemporaries. Widows could not just replace their husbands as heads of household, and they lost the voice within the wider family which they had held through their husbands. At the same time they had “some access to power, prestige and authority in the public sphere because they were not confined, in the role of wife, to the private domain”.<sup>17</sup> Some Venetian women whose husband were often absent, were fully familiar with their husband’s roles, at least within the household, but for other women the learning curve could be steep. Davis suggests that marriage was a way in which women could make an identity for themselves, and widowhood was certainly a way in which it could be developed.<sup>18</sup>

The extent to which a widow was officially attached to the identity of her dead husband seems to have varied throughout Europe. There were certainly problems for the widows of those killed or exiled in the political struggles in Renaissance Florence; for example Alessandra Strozzi’s identity was still attached to that of her husband, who died while in exile. However, in the 80 Years War once a man was executed, his widow’s property could not officially be touched unless she too was implicated.<sup>19</sup> In ancient cultures widows were in fact sometimes required to die on the funeral pyre with their husbands so great was their reliance on their husbands for personal identity. The Venetian widow certainly did not suffer this fate but the fact that so often she was identified by her husband’s name, even if the natal name was also used, is an indication that his identity was still important.

Mourning had particular significance in the relationship between widowhood identity and that of the widow’s husband. Mourning wear was a sign of the physical break from the husband, evidence that the marriage was ended, yet it only made it more clear to the widow and the outside world that her identity was very much still attached to her husband, and the fact of his death. It is significant that when widows were looking for subsequent marriages that mourning wear was modified or abandoned, a sign that the connection to the dead husband was being rejected. Perhaps the most appropriate way to interpret mourning wear is as evidence of a change

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<sup>16</sup> For the 1550s, the Contratti di Nozze were the main source of information. For the 1590s and 1630s, the Avogaria di Comun, Matrimoni, Registri 1-7 were the first sources used, and the Contratti di Nozze were the second source. See Chapter 2 for a more thorough clarification of how the sources were used.

<sup>17</sup> L. Mirrer, *Upon my Husband’s Death*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> N. Z. Davis, ‘Boundaries’, p. 61.

<sup>19</sup> S. M. Wyntjes, ‘Survivors and Status’, p. 403.



in the identity of the woman and the relationship with the husband and his family rather than a severance of that relationship.

Widowhood identity was not only influenced by natal family and husband but also by the actions of the widow herself. It is well established that in early modern Venice, particularly among the upper classes, much of a woman's status was attached to her dowry. Even in the lower classes the dowry was symbolic of the woman's worth. Women's worth was also connected to the influence they had in the complex family alliances held together by marriage, but, on widowhood, status and identity was drawn from a wider range of sources. This does not perhaps apply so greatly to those widows remarrying after a relatively short time but more to those women who established themselves as widows.

The most important way for a widow to create her own status and position within Venetian family and society was through the establishment of authority of some kind. This could be simply as guardian over minor children within the home of another relative. But it could mean development of a position as household head, and matriarch, financial controller of the family fortunes and active participant in family affairs. Kalas considers the importance of widowhood position for France in the sixteenth century, challenging the assumption that widowed noblewomen were only in charge of the family until the oldest son gained majority.<sup>20</sup> Although some women may have retired from active participation in the legal and financial (and thus visible) aspects of running the family, influence was more long-lasting and widespread than just in the daily running of property and household. Authority derived from ownership of property, however small, was crucial. Although many women controlled their own inherited property within their married lives, it was only on widowhood that ownership of more large-scale property was frequently allotted to women. Many women ran households before their husbands' deaths, and restrictions placed by their husbands' wills may have changed little for them materially, but, nevertheless, the authority over that property had been transferred. In some cases of course property passed from father to son, but even in these cases the dynamics of the relationship for the widow changed.

Guardianship and motherhood were important contributors to widowhood identity. Not all widows retained guardianship of children, but it was the normal situation. Increasingly motherhood was recognised by writers in the Renaissance as of instrumental importance, and, although women were often regarded as weak, unable to participate in political or high culture, they were trusted with the upbringing of children. Husbands knew that their wives were generally

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<sup>20</sup> R. J. Kalas, 'The Noblewidow's Place', pp. 519-539.



the people best qualified to care for their children, despite limitations on female activity, and the trust placed in widows was crucial to their position. Klapisch-Zuber recognises that loss of guardianship took something away from the widow, more than just the physical proximity of her children.<sup>21</sup>

Occupation for men was a more important determinant of status than it was for women, but occupation could make a difference to widowhood identity too. Poor women were sometimes craft trained and even those without official training often had much experience in the trade of their husbands. Although it was common for widows of craftsmen to be gradually excluded from participation in their husband's trade, through the removal of permission to employ apprentices for example, some widows did continue. In that case they were able to maintain occupational status for themselves. In England evidence has been found of widows in a large variety of occupations from brewing to jailkeeping. Blom points out that "the more autonomy women had in society, the fewer economic and social penalties she would experience as a widow", and this was particularly so in the case of widows attempting to retain their husband's trade.<sup>22</sup> Venice did not offer openly welcoming opportunities for widows but neither were they entirely excluded from guild participation.<sup>23</sup> The kinds of occupation widows, and other women were often involved in were not those conferring the greatest status, being, for example, in the initial processes in the cloth trade, and in food production. Nevertheless, the ability to earn a living, probably one which had been practised during marriage as well, offered widows an identity aside from a purely marital one.

Upper class widows were discouraged from working, but still often had a financially productive life as landladies, as creditors, or as household heads. The skills required to run a patrician household, in which aristocratic women throughout Europe were trained, were also ones conferring authority, with control over servants, ordering of provisions, education of children. All these activities gave the widow a role in the Venetian economy and society and some widows were even seen to participate in the political life of the city by sponsoring sons through the elections for the *Balla D'Oro*.<sup>24</sup>

Other noble widows found status in positions of authority in religious institutions such as the Zitelle, or the convent of S. Paolo in Milan.<sup>25</sup> Widows founded and lived in such institutions, and acted in positions of guardianship where they were not actually resident. They also

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<sup>21</sup> C. Klapisch-Zuber, "The Cruel Mother", pp. 128-131.

<sup>22</sup> I. Blom, 'The History of Widowhood', p. 202.

<sup>23</sup> See Chapter 4 for information on widows' participation in the Venetian economy.

<sup>24</sup> S. Chojnacki, 'Kinship Ties', pp. 248-249.



frequently requested to be buried in the habit of third orders or convents indicating another common facet of identity, found in the wills of men as well as women. the desire to be associated in death with a religious institution. During life involvement with these institutions offered widows a chance for activity, a chance to create female networks, a chance to offer compassion and charity, or the chance to receive it. Entry into a convent could be a way for a widow to disassociate herself from her husband, family and widowhood identity, or conversely a way of embracing widowhood, without the necessity of remarriage.

Religion as a central factor in the formation of female identity in Venice has been recognised by Martin, who suggests that heretical sects and the Catholic Church, with the privacy of confession, offered women a means of developing independent ideas outside family or marital control.<sup>26</sup> In England the independent sects stressed the equality of men and women, and, in Venice, women were attracted to heretical movements. Women could develop private, female networks and connections even during married life, and similar activities continued during widowhood. Although there is no specific evidence connecting widows to Catholic networks or heretical groups in Venice, (and this is an area open for a great deal more study in the future), the frequency with which widows left religious bequests, over and beyond the amounts found in male wills, suggests that religion was important to widows as a substitute for family support but also as a means of asserting individual choice. 31 out of 51 widows' wills sampled left to religious beneficiaries of some kind, with 10 leaving to convents specifically. Religious bequests were a means of independent action which could not be disregarded or condemned by family. Evidence about the number of widows in convents, third orders and *ospedale* in Venice suggests that many saw claustration within a female community as a suitable way to live. Even within convents widows retained some of the identity which separated them from other women however, as they were 'contaminated' with the knowledge of sexual activity.

Convents were also central to female education in early modern Venice. Many girls were educated in convents, even if not confined within them for life, and literacy could be crucial to the widow. In fact 12-13% of Venetian girls were literate in 1587, the majority of those in the patriciate, and many women of the ruling classes, even during marriage, wrote letters and actively patronised the arts.<sup>27</sup> There are problems in trying to connect widowhood identity with the most highly educated of Venetian women, in the main part because those women who were famous for their education were frequently in convents, or had abandoned their studies on

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<sup>25</sup> P. Renee Baernstein, 'In Widow's Habit', pp. 787-807.

<sup>26</sup> J. Martin, 'Out of the Shadow', pp. 24-29.



marriage. However, a small number of examples illustrate the way in which widowhood was a time when education could be continued and intellectual pursuits taken up again.

Outside Venice, perhaps the most famous widow writer was Cristine de Pizan, whose writing, although somewhat conservative in the light of later ‘feminist’ works, opened the way for other women to enter the debate on the worthiness of women, and also encouraged the education of a female audience. Although not a writer or highly educated intellectual, Alessandra Strozzi was another woman whose education contributed greatly to her widowhood activities. She wrote letters in the vernacular, and exhibited a “merchant mentality” in her dealings with tenants.<sup>28</sup> Within Venetian society there were also a number of examples of highly educated widows, alongside the more famous unmarried intellectuals. Cassandra Fedele exhibited her intellectual talents during her twenties, even giving orations to the Doge and foreign visitors but ended her public intellectual life when she married at 33. She had no children but only returned to her studies in widowhood, sixteen years later, although she remained very poor. At 82 she became abbess of an orphanage, S. Domenico di Castello, and at 91 gave an oration to the Queen of Poland. She was unwilling or unable to use her intellectual talents during the years of her marriage, but returned to them on widowhood, perhaps as a means of making a living but also as regaining her unmarried identity. Laura Cereta offers an entirely different example, widowed at 17 years old and able to continue her education almost unhindered, as if unmarried, but with the status of widowhood as a barrier against claustration or restricted life within wider society.<sup>29</sup> These were of course highly exceptional examples but nevertheless offer evidence about the potential widows had for continuing or even beginning study during the years of their widowhood.

Although the majority of Venetian widows would not have been literate, many of those in the upper classes were, and this literacy and, perhaps more importantly, numeracy could be of great importance to them. A clear understanding of how property was taxed, rented, owned, bequeathed and run gave the widow a fighting chance of independence. It instilled increased self-confidence in business and legal dealings and would have demanded more respect from those whom she was dealing with. Elena Vidal, in her tax declaration, noted very specifically how much she paid in tax each year for the properties noted.<sup>30</sup> She wanted to make it clear to those assessing the tax that she would not be cheated into paying more. Similarly widows who wrote

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<sup>27</sup> M. L. King, *Women of the Renaissance*, p. 172.

<sup>28</sup> A. Morten Crabb, ‘How Typical was Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi’, p. 48.

<sup>29</sup> See M. L. King, *Women of the Renaissance*, pp. 164-211 for more details about female intellectuals.

<sup>30</sup> ASV, Dieci Savi sopra le Decime in Rialto, B. 168, no. 645, 1582.



their own wills were making assertions about their independence and about the irrevocability of their testaments. If written in the widow's own hand then disputes over the contents would have been less easy to justify.<sup>31</sup> Those widows who were intellectually active, and who left written evidence about their lives are the ones who now appear to the historian most clearly. Those from the lowest ranks of society may not have left written evidence, even in the form of a marriage contract or dictated wills so caution is necessary in drawing too many conclusions.

Widows famous for reasons other than their intellect are also important in the illustration of the great variety of widowhood identities. McNamara and Wemple suggest that the position of royal women in Europe before the early modern period was being weakened by xenophobia, due to the tendency of kings to marry foreign royalty.<sup>32</sup> This is an interesting thought in the case of the widow Catherine de Medici, whose attempts to create an identity for herself as royal widow, and, perhaps more importantly, regent of France in the sixteenth century, have been described by Ffolliott.<sup>33</sup> In her search to find a 'prototype' woman ruler with whom to identify herself, Catherine established some of the characteristics expected of a faithful widow. She chose to identify herself with Artemisia, Queen of Caria in the fourth century BC, a widow yet "an authoritative ruler", with male capabilities but never forgetting the grief of her widowhood.<sup>34</sup> Catherine had to show her loyalty to France and her husband and was pictured always in mourning. She recognised the importance of creating her own individual image as a widow but also as a ruler. Her royalty of course made her exceptional although she still recognised what was expected of her as a widow. Caterina Cornaro, Queen of Cyprus, widowed at 19, similarly recognised her position, as subservient to the wishes of those on whom she really depended for power, i.e. the Venetian government. She was persuaded not to remarry, eventually remaining queen for 16 years.

The widow's identity was not solely created by her family, marital, occupational and educational background, but was subject to the expectations held by society. Although self-conception can be seen as the most important thing, the way in which the widow was viewed could also be crucial, particularly to how records of that individual were recorded to be read by

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<sup>31</sup> For examples of widows noting that they have specifically written their testaments in their own hand see ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti Atti Perazzo, B. 1222, no. 287, the 1632 will of Soretta Surian, widow of Gio Francesco Barbo. Similarly see Atti Secco, B. 1191, no. 275, the 1598 will of Graciamana Turlani, widow of Gio Alvise a Basso.

<sup>32</sup> J. A. McNamara and S. F. Wemple, 'Sanctity and Power', p. 113.

<sup>33</sup> S. Ffolliott, 'Catherine de Medici', pp. 227-241.

<sup>34</sup> S. Ffolliott, 'Catherine de Medici', p. 231.



historians at a later date. It was because Artemisia was recorded as a good, but grieving, widow that Catherine de Medici chose her as a prototype and was not at all related to how Artemisia really was, or how she viewed herself. The “Cruel Mother” as noted by Klapisch-Zuber, was remembered as cruel because her son Giovanni Morelli, who recorded the incident, felt betrayed by his mother’s actions, and not because her behaviour was necessarily cruel. Of course recordings may be accurate reflections of the situation, but the point is that it was the image, the impression that the widow gave to the recorder, which was important, not the widow’s personal identity. It is this fact which makes the examples of Maddalena Nerli and Alessandra Strozzi for Florence so interesting, as they were the authors of the evidence used by historians about them. *Ricordanze* (family histories) were normally written by men, but Maddalena took up the writing of one after her husband’s death, and, written to be read by others, it leaves the image Maddalena wanted the world to see. Similarly Alessandra’s letters portray an image of herself she was prepared to share at least with her sons. In Venice, the sources which offer the nearest view of widowhood identity are testaments which, although formulaic, show glimpses of a vengeful temper, as in the case of Giulia Barbo, who disinherited her son, or extreme generosity, as can be seen in the will of Paula Zane, who left a number of large bequests to servants, religious institutions, even relatives of her first husband.<sup>35</sup>

A reduction in the public role of the widow could ease family tensions about her position. Restrictions placed on the widow by society were a reaction to her potential for power, not her use of it. There was perhaps flexibility for the widow as long as the public persona of her widowhood conformed to the required image. In a Venetian society where collective, rather than individual, and male rather than female memorialisation was the norm, there are only rare examples of how the widow as an ideal was depicted pictorially, as Chapter 7 has suggested. However images which do exist indicate that many of the expectations and ideas about status and reputation were in fact far more flexible than it may appear from prescriptive literature. The account of Lusanna noted by Brucker, for example, shows that, although she did not fit the ordinarily accepted patterns of chastity, her neighbours were not so scandalised that they would not speak to her or on her behalf.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> More detail about Giulia Barbo’s will is noted in the Chapter 3. ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Crivelli, B. 222, no 969.

ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Crivelli, B. 222, no 969. ASV, Archivio Notarile Testamenti, Atti Bianco, B. 127, no 732, 1555. Will of Paula, daughter of Bernardo Zane, widow of Giovanni Contarini and Girolamo Contarini.

<sup>36</sup> G. A. Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna*, pp. 84-90.



The *Examinum Matrimoniorum* is a very useful source for examination of what general Venetian society expected to be the behaviour of a widow. As well as noting that the couples in question were believed by the neighbourhood to be husband and wife, cases sometimes state that a woman was held to be a widow because of her behaviour. Out of 64 witness statements found in 31 cases from the *Examinum Matrimoniorum*, 10 note that the woman was living “like a widow”.<sup>37</sup> A further 12 note that the widows was not remarried, and five more note that the woman had actually already remarried. In the case of Diamante, widow of Christian, it was noted that immediately the news arrived that her husband was dead, she dressed in ‘habito vedovile’. Dress is noted in a number of other cases, as is specifically the wearing of a veil in the case of Antonia Meneghana.<sup>38</sup> Non-specific behaviour is also noted, for example the witness in Lucia Zurlotto’s case notes that Lucia, her neighbour, is always held to be a widow.<sup>39</sup>

That widowhood behaviour was recognisable signifies that widowhood identity had an independent existence. While a woman without a husband could technically be a widow, there were no assurances that she would behave in a way that would make outsiders think she was one. Conversely, a woman could take on the identity of a widow, without actually being of that marital status. One particularly interesting example is that of Paulina, widow of Andrea, who for many years lived the life of a widow, as she believed that her husband had died while in Rome.<sup>40</sup> She died a widow and was buried as such, and it was only when her husband returned and was forced to prove that he was no longer married, that the tale came to light. She was held to be a widow, and in fact believed herself to be one and that was sufficient for her burial to be noted in the church records with the title widow.

It is unlikely that in fact many of the widows recognised as such lived up to the ‘ideal’, but nevertheless there were characteristics about their behaviour, person and dress which identified them to the rest of society as widows. Remarriage was clearly one sign that a woman felt herself to be widowed, unless she wanted to risk a charge of bigamy. Failure to marry was also regarded as a sign of widowhood, particularly to those who had not known the woman’s husband and could imagine no other reason why she would not marry. Of course on a superficial level dress was the most important means of recognition and it separated the widow from other women. Mourning wear did detract from the widow’s ability to form an identity away from the assumptions caused by her obvious marital status, but in some ways was beneficial. Courtesans

<sup>37</sup> Exact records of the *Examinum Matrimoniorum* cases used are found in Chapter 2, footnote 13.

<sup>38</sup> ACPV, *Examinum Matrimoniorum*, B. 37, case dated 4 July 1637.

<sup>39</sup> ACPV, *Examinum Matrimoniorum*, B. 37, case dated 10 November 1637.

<sup>40</sup> ACPV, *Examinum Matrimoniorum*, B. 32, 1632-33, case dated 21 March 1632.



often dressed like widows and, in the case of refugees in Florence, some women even pretended to be widows in order to gain entry.<sup>41</sup>

Widows, as recognised deserving poor, were a cause of sympathy, but also a cause of derision, as can be seen in caricatures found in literature from the time. There was stigma attached to widows particularly in remarriage. Marrying a widow was not always regarded as something to advertise and this is evident from the numbers of widows found in the records of secret marriages. In fact 6 out of 47 secret marriages in the 1660s and 9 out of 40 in the 1670s noted a widow as the female partner.<sup>42</sup> This is also evident in the number of marriages involving widows found only in the *Cronica Matrimonia*, but in none of the official registers.<sup>43</sup> For the 1550s, out of 103 marriages which were found only in the *Cronica Matrimonia* and not in the official registers or the marriage contracts registered with the *Avogaria di Comun*, 23 involved remarriage of widows. Of those 38 found for the 1590s, 17 were the remarriages of widows, and interestingly 10 of those were to men noted as widowers. It is also suggested by the numbers of widows who were not noted as such in the official registers and only in the marriage contracts themselves, as seen in Table 8.2, above. Stigma attached to remarriage was certainly one reason why a widow would marry secretly or at least not register her marriage officially, and some secret marriages from the later seventeenth century mention the bride's widowhood as a reason why the marriage is being conducted secretly. Another possible reason for such omissions was that the marriage at a later age was not expecting offspring, and thus official registration, determining legitimacy of the children for participation in the Grand Council, was not necessary. It is in fact very difficult to determine reasons why widowhood identity would be disguised, but the secret marriage records at least offer suggestions about the difficulties for the remarrying widow.

A number of conclusions now need to be drawn, relating to age and the other factors affecting identity. Age was a significant variable on the progress of widowhood. Many women widowed young had less independence of choice than those widowed at a later stage in their marriage, but conversely elderly widows had fewer chances of making a new marriage or earning a living. Those widows who superficially had the most protection and yet choice on widowhood were those with young children, who had the opportunity, if given guardianship, to remain in the marital home. Unfortunately being left with young children could also be a terrible burden for

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<sup>41</sup> S. Cohen, *The Evolution of Women's Asylums*, p. 107.

<sup>42</sup> ACPV, *Matrimoni Segreti*, B.1 part 1, 1633-1678, part 2, 1678-1688.



widows with no financial means. Older women were more likely to be involved in family and personal finances, they were more likely to control property and to retain independence but at the same time this was not always beneficial.

With regard to identity, it is clear that many widows felt their identities to still be tied to the natal lineage, and continued to use the names of their natal families. Husbands' status was important, but perhaps not as crucial as has previously been thought. Assumptions about female status and its constant relationship to marital condition cannot be relied upon. Where a woman was a widow she was not always noted as such within documents, and there were a number of reasons why the omission of the title of widow could occur. Identity was not just related to marital status, family connections or even personal identity. Behaviour and social acceptance also defined what a widow was. Evidence suggesting that a woman could live and die as a widow even though she in fact was not adds to this idea that widowhood identity was not simply based on material reality. Identity is a defining factor which helps in the examination of widowhood as a whole by showing the importance of legal distinctions, financial capability, family connections and social status to the individual widow.

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<sup>43</sup> Cronica Matrimonia, ASV, Avogaria di Comun B. 106/1, 107/2.



## Conclusion – Chapter 9

The purpose of this conclusion is to draw together the evidence from all of the chapters of this thesis so that a more complete evaluation of the position of Venetian widows can take place. It was established in the introduction that “the Venetian widow” as an easily identifiable, consistent entity did not exist, so the purpose of this thesis has not been to look for an average, but instead to demonstrate the great variety of possibilities which existed for the woman who had lost her husband.

The introduction established that there are a number of ways in which the study of widowhood has been approached before. The use of demographic material, literary and financial sources, and quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis within this thesis has allowed a wide-ranging and innovative study of the position of the Venetian widow. The chapters of this thesis consider law, finance and remarriage, the more traditional realms of the historian of widowhood, but also family relations, cultural constructs and identity. New approaches have been used to consider identity, looking at the frequency with which marital titles were used and the forms of name recorded. Consideration of identity as an important facet of the widow’s life has allowed this study to go beyond traditional sources and methodologies and to offer a more three-dimensional image.

While the ideological approach of almost any historical writing on widowhood comes from the background of feminist historiography, neither an overwhelmingly negative nor positive viewpoint has been expounded in this thesis. It is not possible to study women in almost any early modern context without recognising that their position, political, financial and social, was different to that of men, and often greatly restricted; however, it is the intention of this thesis to concentrate more on what widows could achieve rather than to dwell on what they could not do.

It is also important, when approaching a topic of study which addresses issues of power, to recognise that modern conceptions of independence, liberation, and suppression were not necessarily those held in the early modern period. What would today be regarded as the potential for independent action, may have been regarded as an unwanted responsibility by widows in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This dichotomy between liberation and burden is perhaps best seen in the question of guardianship of children. Widowhood guardianship is today regarded as representing female independence, but it could, in the sixteenth century, have been the factor which caused a widow to live in poverty, and dependence, without control over her life.

Problems with projecting modern values onto early modern actions are fully recognised within this thesis.



The use of a large number and wide variety of sources, as well as approaches, is a crucial component of this research, and Chapter 2 explains what sources have been used and how. It identifies sources not used within the thesis but suitable for further study, to make the thesis a useful tool for scholars wishing to continue in this field of research. Widows are evident in many early modern Venetian sources, although the fact that widows and other women were rarely noted in governmental papers and military document confirms that they were excluded from official participation in political matters. However, widows were, compared to married women for example, very visible. This does not necessarily mean that they were particularly independent personally, but what it does show is that widows, as women without immediately obvious representatives, more frequently had to be actively involved in the kinds of negotiation which produced written evidence.

It was considered more modest and perhaps even safer for a widow to have a male representative to act for her in legal and financial dealings, and many widows were represented in negotiations by brothers, sons and sometimes fathers. On the other hand, it is also common to find a widow acting as a representative for someone else, particularly for daughters and other female relatives. The nature and layout of the sources alone can therefore offer insight into widowhood, as well as the more specific contents.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the representation of widows in one particular type of source. It questions the position of the widow in relation to the written legislation of the time, the functioning of that legislation and the position of the widow within the courtroom. While the legal system of early modern Venice identified widows substantially with other women, they were still separated, by their marital status, and by their potential freedom. Legislators and legal officials had a twofold image of the widow and they aimed to protect her, but also the family and society from her potential actions. This duality of restriction and protection was a crucial factor in the relationship between widows and the law. Dowry reclamation was officially protected and the widow was one of the first creditors to the husband's estate; nevertheless, restrictions set on the dowry limit were also an attempt to prevent too much property from falling into female hands. Widows were welcome to their entitlement of the husband's estate, in the minds of the legislators, as long as the reclamation did not affect the central patrimony or allow too much property to be outside the control of the patriarchal family structure.

Chapter 4's consideration of the financial situation for the Venetian widow confronts some of the issues raised by the discussion on widows and the law from a more practical perspective. Widowhood finance was often intrinsically linked to that of the widow's natal



family and her husband. If the widow's family had given her a large dowry initially then there was a greater sum for her to reclaim on widowhood. A large dowry may have caused a greater struggle when the widow attempted to remove it from the patrimony, but, if reclaimed, assured a more stable existence for the widow. With regard to husbands, the research has shown that it was extremely common for them to leave additional bequests to their wives and a wealthy husband was in a good position to assure his wife's financial future. Conversely, a woman with a small dowry and poor husband was less likely to enter widowhood with her financial stability ensured. But, no matter how influential financial background was for the widow, it was not the only influential factor.

Financial markets, legal difficulties and social position also played a part in how a Venetian woman coped financially on the death of her husband. Difficulties in dowry reclamation, for example, could be the cause of greatly reduced circumstances for the widow, although it appears that many widows were able to reclaim at least part of their dowry entitlement. Changes in the economic climate could affect the ability of a widow to earn a living. A great variety of possibilities therefore faced the widow, as far as finance was concerned.

Chapter 5 offers a less ambiguous picture of widowhood than is seen in several other chapters. Evidence from demographic sources, as well as wills and notarial archives, indicates a consistency in the relations widows had with their offspring, and with their wider families. Widows were frequently both physically and emotionally close to their children, no matter what their age, and relations with natal family in particular were often close, despite the fact that the woman may have left her natal household at a relatively early age. Wills indicate natal family and offspring as the most frequently requested executors and also the most frequent recipients of the *residuo* and other large portions of widows' property. A small number of widows, of course, did not fit that mould. They mentioned no relations in their wills and lived alone or in institutions; so convents, third orders and *ospedale* have also been considered as alternatives to the traditional family network. Widows were prominent within these institutions, and the institutions, in return, were a crucial source of support for widows, offering an alternative for women who chose not to remain within the family environment or to live alone. There were a variety of family positions in which the widow could find herself, because of age, finances and simply the constitution of the family, but it was common for relations to be good, and contact, particularly with offspring, relatively close.

The life of the widow was partly dependent on external factors and partly on personal choice, and Chapter 6, in its discussion of remarriage, considers the role of the widow in the



decision to remarry. It is symptomatic of the nature of widowhood that those who were the most attractive marriage partners, the wealthy widows, were also those often in the best position to choose to remain single and independent. The research has shown that remarriage was significant to the marriage market as a whole, but the fact that it was not more frequent raises the issue of choice as a deciding factor.

The potential ambiguity of the widow's position is evident in the contemporary discussion surrounding remarriage. While the Church and prescriptive writers constantly stated the importance of chastity to the widow, this was countered by the fear, evident in the actions of the legislators, that a widow, without guidance from a new husband, was a source of potential trouble. The widow not remarrying, yet reclaiming her dowry, was damaging the patrimony for her children. The widow who did remarry was bringing a dangerous stranger into the household, who could influence the lives of her children. The ideal widow, as discussed in Chapter 7, would remain chaste, yet take the advice from male members of her family. She would keep her dowry within the patrimony and think only about the respect her dead husband deserved, and the care her children required.

Whose ideal the 'ideal' widow was is an important point of discussion within Chapter 7. There were different ways of writing about widows and widowhood, and how the widow was represented, or advised to behave, depended greatly on the gender and background of the writer and the intended audience. Cabe's work is particularly interesting because, although conservative in many of his views, he was writing for a female patron. As well as the good of the patriarchal society which produced most of the prescriptive writing of the day, much of Cabe's advice appears to be intended for the good of the widow. Fonte writes from a female perspective, offering more radical discussion, nevertheless still recognising the practical restrictions facing widows and other women. These, and other literary sources offer stereotypes, which can be identified, and compared with what is known about the actual situation.

Visual images, as found in costume literature for example, also offer evidence of the ambiguous position of the widow. Widows' weeds, often similar to nuns' habits and those of the third orders, were a signal to the outside world that the widow was in mourning and remaining chaste in the memory of her dead husband. Prostitutes used costume similar to widows' weeds to gain respect, yet there were aspects of widows' clothing which concerned moralists. Veils were a sign of modesty, but also a means of hiding. The veiled woman was less answerable for her actions than was the woman whose face, and thus identity, could be plainly seen.



The question of identity is the final theme of this thesis. Widowhood was an identifying feature, particularly in written records, yet it is difficult to assess how far it really affected the way a woman behaved, and was viewed, especially as it has been shown that the term was not consistently used. A very worthwhile examination of the use of husbands' and fathers' names as a form of identity has shown that, even after widowhood, some women chose to identify themselves with their natal families as well as, or even instead of, their husbands. In addition to personal identity, this chapter has also raised the question of more general widowhood identity. By examining cases of women who 'lived as widows', it is possible to evaluate in more detail exactly what widowhood identity was seen as by people in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Venice. The question of widowhood identity unites all other factors considered in this thesis by examining what it was that made a widow a widow, and thus the reason why they should be examined as a whole at all.

What an evaluation of each of the chapters of the thesis in turn has shown is that there can be no one conclusion drawn about widows and widowhood in early modern Venice. What is clear is that widowhood was a state which affected each individual woman in a different way. While there are trends which can be identified, with regard to bequeathing, or dowry reclamation for example, widows faced a great variety of legal, financial, marital and familial situations. They were restricted, protected, rich, poor, supported, downtrodden, venerated and mocked. This variety of situations is seen in two different ways. Firstly, it is clear from an evaluation of financial, and, to some extent, legal sources, that the practical situation for the widow could be very wide-ranging. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the way in which widows were viewed by writers, legislators and to some extent society at large, was very ambiguous.

There were a wide range of widowhood possibilities for all Venetian widows, but perhaps most for the patrician women who, because of their visibility in the sources, have been the main focus of much of this study. Widows in the lower social groups were less likely to face the possibility of an independent and comfortable widowhood. They were likely to have to work to survive and to have little to leave in their wills. Patrician widows, though facing family pressure about the use of reclaimed dowries and other inheritance, were in a better position to make decisions on their future, and decisions based on preference and not just pragmatism. It is important to recognise that choice was not the only factor in widowhood diversity, however and, while the wealthy, experienced and powerful Venetian widow could face an uncertain future because of the choices she could make, all widows faced uncertainty because there were a



number of situations which could be imposed upon them. Wealth did not affect the variety of possibilities for the course of a widowhood. It just made the possibility of personal choice more likely. That the Venetian widow's position was essentially one of uncertainty and ambiguity may not seem on first sight to be a particularly positive conclusion, but it is in fact one which tries to evaluate the evidence found, while opening the way for further study.

It has been a constant theme of this study that widowhood was a state based on almost false borders and this thesis reflects the fact that all most widows had in common was the loss of a husband. The diversity of potential situations reflects not only the uncertain nature of widowhood for each individual widow, but also the ambiguous nature of 'widowhood' as a definition or identifying factor. The discussion of images and identities has only added to this conclusion and this study of the Venetian widow has shown that the reality was often in-between stereotypes. Widows were not all independent, desperate to remarry, immodest and disrespectful of their husbands' memories. They were not all chaste, concerned only for the welfare of their children, modest and thrifty. They were not all poverty-stricken, unable to work, desperate for charity and manipulated by the wills of greedy families. There was no average widow.

This thesis has a place within the history of widowhood. It examines the place of the widow within Venice's own unique legal situation and holds her up for comparison with her contemporaries elsewhere in Italy and Europe. It also calls into question assumptions about the ability of the widow to act independently and on her own behalf. Many conclusions conform with what historians have said in the past about remarriage, guardianship and family relations, but, through the use of literary and visual sources, for example, it has been possible to examine the motives behind the treatment of widows and to look in detail at contemporary views on issues such as remarriage and household finances.

The importance of this study to Venetian history is also considerable. First and foremost it identifies the widow as a significant figure within Venetian society, and one worthy of much greater attention. Further, it examines Venetian society from a new perspective, considering how law and finance affected a particular group of women. Individual aspects of the research also affect existing Venetian scholarship. For example the discussion of dowry reclamation and widowhood finance is significant to those studying inheritance and family finance. The examination of the remarriage rate is crucial to those looking at marital patterns more generally. The question of how frequently widows were actually noted as such, addressed in Chapter 8, urges caution to all scholars assuming that marital identity of a woman was always noted and that it is the most



useful means of identifying her. This thesis aimed to open up the issue of the Venetian widow for further research, and has achieved this, not only by clearly identifying useful sources, but also by investigating the possibilities of those sources. There is a glut of information available and widowhood is an aspect of the life of Venetian women too long overlooked, and yet worthy of and suitable for intensive study.



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## Abbreviations and Glossary<sup>1</sup>

**ACPV (Archivio della Curia Patriarcale di Venezia)** - Venetian Patriarchal Archive.

**AdC (Avogaria di Comun)** - Attorneys General or Chief Law Officers of Venice. Responsible for the registration of noble births and marriages. In the **ASV**. (C&P)

**Alimenti and Tornate** - The rights of Florentine women to shelter and subsistence from their natal families on widowhood.

**ASV (Archivio di Stato di Venezia)** - Venetian State Archives

**Archivio Notarile** - Notarial Archives which include wills, some marriage contracts and many other private legal documents, such as sales of property and business agreements. In the **ASV**.

**Archivio Segreto** - An archive of documents not registered with government officials, but with religious authorities, because of a need to keep them secret. In the **ACPV**.

**Balla D'Oro** - Also called the *Barbarella*. A lottery which allowed number of patrician males under the age of 25 to enter the **Maggior Consiglio**.

**Beni Parafernali** - See **Dimissoria**.

**Beni Particolari** - See **Dimissoria**.

**B. (Busta/Buste)** - The folders into which much of the material in the Venetian archives is organised.

**Campo (pl. Campi)** - Areas of open urban space, also measures of surface area. Exact amount varied between Venetian provinces. (C&P)

**Casetta** - A small house, or part of a house.

**Causarum Matrimonialium** - Marital litigation records from the courts which dealt with issues such as requests for separation. In the **ACPV**.

**Charivari** - "Ritualised manifestations of cultural rebellion".<sup>2</sup> These protests were often directed against remarriages and were most common in southern France and parts of northern Italy, although not in Venice.

**Cittadino (pl. Cittadini)** - The 'citizen' class of Venetian society (containing about 10% of the total population). This group of families were able to claim certain rights and distinctions but were not eligible for membership of the **Maggior Consiglio**.

**Codicillio** - An addition to a will which invalidates only part of provision made within it, or simply adds to that provision.

**Compilazione delle Legge** - An eighteenth-century source providing summaries of earlier Venetian laws. Indexed by subject and located in the **ASV**.

**Contradotta (pl. Contradotte)** - A payment made by a husband to a wife in return for her **Dote** (dowry). Not always given in Venice. Sometimes noted in marriage contracts but payments were more frequently made as part of the dowry reclamation process.

**Contratti di Nozze** - Marriage contracts, often found registered with the **AdC**, but also in private, family archives. They often contained details of any dowry given.

**Converse** - Women who entered convents without taking full orders.

**Corredum** - Also called the *terzo*. The portion of the dowry retained by a Venetian man on the death of his wife if there were no children and her family reclaimed the dowry. Or the portion retained by the husband's estate if the widow chose to reclaim her dowry. Initially set at a third of the total dowry, then, as dowries increased in size, limited to 1000 ducats.

**Cronica Matrimonia** - Two books containing records of **Patriciate** and non -patriciate marriages. Found in the archives of the **AdC**.

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions followed by (C&P) are paraphrased versions of those found in D. Chambers and B. Pullan – *Venice*, p. xxi for abbreviations and pp. 460-464 for glossary.

<sup>2</sup> A. Burguiere - 'The Charivari', p. 87.



**Decima** - The 10% tax operated by the Venetian government on property, both 'real' and movable. Records in the ASV.

**Dieci Savi Sopra le Decime in Rialto** - The 10 Justices who administered the Decima tax.

**Dimissoria** - Also called **Beni Parafernali**. Portion of the wife's goods not enclosed by restrictions placed upon the rest of the dowry. This property was still in the husband possession, but was in the wife's control. **Beni Particolari** - The wife had possession of, and control over this property.

**Dote** - Dowry. Payment made by the wife's family, or by the wife herself, to the husband on marriage. Technically the wife's property, and returned to her on widowhood, but controlled by the husband during marriage.

**Ducat** - Silver currency. Divided into 6 Lire, 4 Soldi (124 Soldi in total). (C&P)

**Examinum Matrimoniorum** - Records of the Ecclesiastical Justices who examined men and women on the question of their marital state. In the ACPV.

**Fraterna** - System of business and inheritance used in Venice whereby property and businesses passed to groups of brothers and were controlled jointly rather than individually.

**Giudici del Proprio** - Justices in charge of property, and also in charge of dowry reclamation for widows. (C&P)

**I.R.E (Istituto di Ricovero e di Educazione)** - Venetian archive, housed on the Giudecca, containing records from convents and Venetian institutions such as **ospedale** and **ospizi**.

**Livello (pl. Livelli)** - A lease, or personal load disguised as the sale and lease of property. (C&P)

**Maggior Consiglio** - Great Council. Primary Venetian government body to which all adult male members of the **Patriciate** belonged.

**Mobili** - Property which can be transported over a distance, i.e. not land or buildings.

**Mundualdus** - The tradition in which all women, single, married and widowed, required a male guardian to act on their behalf in legal matters. Particularly noted in Florence, not active in Venice.

**Ospedali /Ospizi** - Institutions found in Venice from the tenth century, housing the sick, the poor and the destitute, who included widows, ex-prostitutes and vulnerable girls. Some were established by bequest, others attached to guilds or religious institutions.

**Parafernali** - See **Dimissoria**.

**Patriciate** - For Venice, this term describes the families from the upper levels of society whose adult males were eligible for membership of the **Maggior Consiglio**.

**Personae Miserales** - Those regarded as deserving of charity by the Ecclesiastical authorities.

**Pizzochere** - Female members of Tertiary orders. Often lived a nun-like existence.

**Popolani** - This term is used to describe the population of Venice who did not belong to the **Patriciate** or **Cittadino** classes.

**Poveri Vergognosi** - Poor who were regarded as 'deserving, rather than idle. Included widows and orphans.

**Procuratori di San Marco** - A highly prestigious magistracy containing nine procurators, or advocates. One of their primary duties was to administer charitable trusts. They were sometimes appointed guardians of orphans and the mentally ill, or as executors of wills. (C&P)

**Prove di Nobiltà** - Justices in charge of cases to do with nobility. Examined women wishing to marry into the **Patriciate** to assess the suitability of their offspring for membership of the **Maggior Consiglio**.

**Provveditori Sopra le Pompe** - Commissioners in charge of sumptuary legislation.

**Raspe** - Records of Justices investigating sex crime, including adultery. Records are part of the AdC in the ASV.

**Reg. (Registro)** - Register



**Residuo** - The remainder of an estate after all other debts and bequests have been paid. Generally the largest portion of the estate.

**Scuola (pl. Scuole)** - A religious confraternity. In Venice the Scuole were divided into the Grande (large) and Piccole (small). (C&P)

**Stabili** - Property which is permanent, including agricultural land, woods and buildings.

**Stabili della Città** - Property located within Venice, which could be given in part repayment of a dowry.

**Stabili di Fuori** - Property located outside Venice, which could be given in part repayment of a dowry.

**Status Animarum** - Survey of 'souls' undertaken in the 1590s by the Ecclesiastical authorities. Fairly complete census of Venetian inhabitants. Approximately half the records survive and are found in the **ACPV**.

**Stride** - Literally meaning 'screeching'. Judicial warnings given so that interested parties could not claim ignorance. In cases of dowry reclamation, the **stride** period lasted two months, giving relatives and others interested the opportunity to contradict the reclamation judgement before payment was made.

**Testamenti** - Wills. Often found in Venice in the records of the **Archivio Notarile**.

**Venetian Style** - The Venetian year began on 1 March, hence 15 January 1552 in the Venetian style is 15 January 1553 in modern style. (C&P)